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Classroom Uses of Social Network Sites: Traditional Practices or New Literacies?

Maryam Moayeri

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the practices of two teachers who had chosen to use the social network site (SNS) Ning to create online classrooms as supplements to their physical classrooms in order to bridge the self and school-selected literacies of adolescents. The study further aimed to identify whether the ways in which the teachers were using the SNS constituted a new literacy practice and if so in what ways. It supports and adds to the new literacies theory in four ways: 1. by revisiting the notion of what constitutes literacy, 2. by identifying attributes that do and do not constitute new literacies, 3. by supporting the view that new technologies do not automatically correspond to new literacies, and 4. by showing that new technologies may end up devaluing other modes of learning.

Keywords:

New literacies, social network sites, web 2.0, social software, literacy, blogging

Purpose

If we look back, we see some vivid similarities between historical literacies and today's literacies. This is especially true if we look across cultures. We see literacies that are connected to images and sound. We see connections to oral storytelling, instruments like drums and flutes, facial expressions, gesturing with arms and hands and an abundance of rock carvings (Bruce, 2003). These literacies along with others have all found their way into the digital realm via the Internet. Even the act of recognizing and valuing these forms has allowed them to be slotted under the term literacy and now new literacies.

Lankshear and Knobel (2007) state that to consider a literacy new, it needs to involve not only new technology, but also new ethos. New ethos refers to the fact that "new literacies are more 'participatory,' 'collaborative,' and 'distributed' in nature than conventional literacies. That is, they are less 'published,' 'individuated,' and 'author-centric' than conventional literacies. They are also less 'expert-dominated' than conventional literacies" (Lankshear & Knobel, 2007, 9).

These new literacies are gaining social value because culture and literacy cannot be separated from technology; they are complexly and intricately connected to one another (Warschauer & Ware, 2008). Because literacies are radically shifting, a major disconnect is becoming apparent between the self-selected and school-selected literacy practices of adolescents. Regardless of whether schools value the myriad of ways that students construct meaning with text, it is still an inherent part of the definition of literacies.

The purpose of this study was to examine the practices of two teachers who had chosen to use the social network site (SNS) Ning to create online classrooms as supplements to their physical classrooms in order to bridge the self and school-selected literacies of adolescents. A social networking website builds active social networks or

connections among users who share an interest. These sites allow users to create profiles and include opportunities for interaction at a variety of levels.

The study further aimed to identify whether the ways in which the teachers were using the SNS constituted literacy practices that were new and if so in what ways. To be able to grow new literacies theory, it is as important to be able to identify what constitutes new literacies as it is to identify what does not do so. It is especially necessary to identify practices that may look particularly similar to new literacies, but in fact are traditional literacies disguised in a technological garment. Therefore, the study also focused on identifying attributes of these online classrooms that did not fit within the parameters of the growing new literacies perspective.

Theoretical Framework

This study is in line with the new literacies perspective and consequently pulls from different theoretical frameworks and viewpoints. It pulls from Lankshear and Knobel's theory of two mindsets, the discourse around Web 2.0, the tensions between traditional practices and new technologies, and the belief that literacy is deictic. It also extends the new literacies perspective by revisiting the notion of what constitutes literacy.

Web 2.0 and the Two Mindsets

Lankshear and Knobel (2007) refer to two different types of mindsets which have to do with physical and digital space. They refer to the first mindset as "physical-industrial" and they refer to the second, which encompasses ethos, as "cyberspatialpostindustrial" (9-10). The first mindset supposes that the modern world has not shifted in a fundamental way, but has made significant technological advancements (Lankshear & Knobel, 2007). Conversely, the second mindset supposes that the modern world has changed in a fundamental way and that this shift has to do with the technological advancements and its capacities. The second mindset is about "people imagining and exploring new ways of doing things and new ways of being that are made possible by new tools and techniques, rather than using new technologies to do familiar things in more 'technologized' ways (first mindset)" (Lankshear & Knobel, 2007, p. 10).

This theory fits well with the shift to Web 2.0 which Tim O'Reilly (2005) originally brought up at a conference following the crash of the dot-com companies. He suggested that the failure of dot-com companies may have been a result of them having Web 1.0 features (that encompass mindset 1) as oppose to companies who thrived and had 2.0 features (that encompass mindset 2) (Lankshear & Knobel, 2007). Web 1.0 applications are more similar to desktop applications that are being used in more static ways than those who created them intend them to be used (mindset 1). People use these applications presumably because they deem them reliable and authoritative (Lankshear & Knobel, 2007). Web 2.0 applications encourage contribution by the masses and allow them to have control over the content posted (mindset 2).

Web 1.0 is similar to an industrial approach where there is a strong separation between those who consume and those who produce (mindset 1). Web 2.0 is based on a post-industrial approach and focuses on "collective participation,' 'collaboration' and distributed expertise and intelligence, much more than on manufacture of finished commodities by designated individuals and work teams operating in official production zones and/or drawing on concentrated expertise and intelligence within a shared physical setting" (mindset 2) (Lankshear & Knobel, 2007, p. 17). Wikipedia is a model case of a Web 2.0 application and the second mindset as it enables users to collaborate and contribute their knowledge and expertise. It "embraces the power of the Web to

harness collective intelligence” (O’Reilly 2005, n.p.). Another important component that distinguishes between Web 1.0 and 2.0 is the idea of folksonomy which enables us to categorize by tagging and searching instead of in a hierarchical manner.

In both Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 ways, the Internet is now used more often than the TV (Synovate, 2007) and it is available on all sorts of devices including Personal Digital Assistants (PDA) and mobile devices (Shih & Allen, 2006) and therefore can be accessed nearly anywhere. It is no surprise then that the Internet is the students’ primary source of information for personal and schooling reasons (Williams & Rowlands, 2007). For the purposes of this study, it was important to identify classes that were using Web 2.0 applications and then to investigate how they were using it in mindset 1 and 2 ways. The Web 2.0 application used by the classes in the study was the SNS Ning.

Traditional Practice or New Literacy

Simply because Web 2.0 applications are being used, it does not mean that they are being used in mindset 2 ways. Old practices continue to be sustained with new technologies. For example, in his laptop classroom study, Kevin Leander (2007) observed that the laptops were being used in ways that mostly did not require the Internet. Rather they were “simply offline practices being conducted in an online environment” (Leander, 2007, 28). One teacher participant commented that word processing consisted of 90% of the time spent on the laptops (Leander, 2007).

Similarly, Hodas (1993) wrote about the failure of most technologies on changing the culture of schooling. He mentioned that the technologies that thrive in schools—the blackboard, overhead projector, and photocopier—are technologies that assist teachers in communicating and reproducing materials and in maintaining their authoritative position (Hodas, 1993). The blackboard and overhead gather people around a common object/text and the photocopier provides the same text several times (Leander, 2007).

The computer on the other hand can dismantle the authoritative focus and disperse it amongst many. For example, Warschauer’s research team found that the reading of students in laptop classrooms differed from students in conventional classrooms in the following three ways. First, teachers used computers to aid with the scaffolding of their students’ learning. For instance, students used online dictionaries to learn the meaning of words, graphic organizers for plotting and mapping and text-to-speech applications for learning pronunciation of words (Warschauer, 2008). Second, teachers used laptops for epistemic engagement by collaborating to deduce and generate meaning. The teachers had their students involved in activities such as analyzing short stories on forums, posting book reviews that they wrote on Amazon.com, and incorporating digital music with interpretation of poetry. Third, the students in laptop classrooms spent more time reading in digital environments than did students in classrooms without laptops. Furthermore, having access to laptops, allowed the student participants to implement different modes in their assignments. For example, they incorporated video, music, and animation in their work.

Moreover, the New London Group (1996) reminds us that as new literacies progressively become multiple; it is much more likely that the collective knowledge of a classroom will be larger than that of any individual teacher. This points at the importance of moving away from the teacher as knowledge container and provider and shifting to a more collaborative and active learning mode.

Literacy as Deixis

Because of the deictic nature of literacy (Leu, 2000), it is impossible for any one individual to keep up with the rapidly shifting literacies that are appearing on the Web (Leu et al., 2007). It is, therefore, unfair to expect teachers to be current on the rapid influx of technologies. Instead, being digitally literate includes being able to distinguish which technological applications are appropriate for the intended need (Greenhow, Robelia, & Hughes, 2009).

Even if teachers were capable of staying current and they did know more than the collective, it would be impossible to incorporate all the new forms of technology within a classroom. The point, however, is not to inundate the class with the new technologies, but rather to recognize them as potential new literacies worth consideration.

Schooling use to have as its goal to conform and regulate its students to assimilate in a manner that would best suit the industrial society. Today schooling has the opposite goal where it invites students to have different viewpoints, interests, and purposes and encourages original thought and direction (New London Group, 1996). This mindset meshes well with Web 2.0 technologies such as SNS.

Recognizing and Valuing All Literacies

I'd like to extend the understanding of new literacies by suggesting that any manner in which learners learn should be accepted and valued as a form of literacy. Literacy is not about reading and writing. It encompasses listening and speaking. It goes into the visual realm to include seeing and understanding images, colour, spacing, structure, movement, and more.

To understand a concept, it is not necessary to read a text in its entirety. It is not necessary to read about it at all. Other options to learn the same material include listening to podcasts or audio books, watching films or examining diagrams, partaking in hands on activities that allow for trial and error, or having someone explain a concept.

Though these practices have existed for some time, our recognizing the practices as literacies has only become prevalent in the last few decades. Unfortunately, though, it seems as if the recognition has only been on a surface level. For example, the main focus of literacy associations and conferences continues to be on reading and writing; provincial and state exams almost exclusively assess reading and writing skills; when students learn content from one another instead of reading a text, or when they listen to an audio recording of a book instead of reading it, society considers this as cheating. If we truly valued different forms of learning and recognized them as important literacies, then they would be more apparent in practice and not just in theory.

Furthermore, teachers focus on print literacies over digital ones and it is, therefore, assumed that print literacy precedes multiple literacies (Luke, 2002). Students need not learn print literacy before engaging in multimedia digital literacies (Semali & Pailliotet, 1999); they will learn the principles of print literacies while engaged in multimedia digital literacies (King & O'Brien, 2002). Teachers' preference for print literacy may even lead them to not notice students' competencies or incompetencies with digital literacies (King & O'Brien, 2002). Though the literacy discourse is expanding to include several modes and ways of learning, the practice in the field is not adequately supporting this discourse.

Methods

This study was conducted in a school where the administrators encouraged the use of new literacies and digital practices such as the implementation of social media tools. The school where the study took place defined digital literacy as “the ability to locate, organize, understand, evaluate, use and create information using digital technology.” In the past two years, the school set as a goal to move beyond looking at technology use as teaching students about hardware and software functions and to focus more on how these technologies can assist students in learning the school subjects.

Though often the terminology of the school is not up to date or specific, they are striving to stay current with the new trends that seem to have potential in education. For example, the school administration and faculty still use the term IT (Information Technology) instead of ICT (Information and Communication Technology) though they are clearly implementing communication applications. The staff use terms like IT, digital literacy, computer literacy, internet literacy, and even information literacy interchangeably. This practice is noticed even in scholarly works, where different researchers are using the different terms to describe the same phenomenon or using the same term to describe different phenomenon. The explosion of terms is part of the reason a new literacies perspective is needed—to help define, understand, and distinguish between different terminologies and their uses and impact. Upon reviewing the school’s definition of digital literacy, reading its goals, mission statements, and technology strategy, interviewing key participants, and observing teaching practices, it became apparent that despite the terminology used, the school was very much adopting a new literacies framework. However, their theoretical adoption of it did not always match the practical implementation.

This paper focuses on a case study I conducted of two English 10 classes using the SNS Ning, where the teachers created online classroom communities as supplements to their physical classrooms. The goal of both case study teachers was to implement an SNS within their classrooms.

To learn how the SNS was being implemented within these classrooms, I collected data in four ways. First, I conducted individual interviews with the classroom teachers to find out information such as why they had chosen to create an SNS for their classes and how its use had impacted their teaching and student learning. Formal interviews took place at the beginning and end of the study, while informal discussions that added to my understanding were had throughout the study. Second, I attended the classes for a span of three months to observe what types of activities and discussions were taking place in the physical classroom setting. Third, I observed the online classroom space on the SNS Ning to see how the teachers were using it and what types of information students were contributing. Lastly, I conducted a focus group interview with the students of the class using blog technology. I asked the students questions such as “what do you enjoy about using the SNS as an online classroom environment,” “what challenges do you face in using the SNS as an online classroom environment,” and “how has the way you learn changed since using the SNS as an online classroom environment.” I posted the questions on a blog at the termination of the main assignment taking place on the SNS and students were encouraged to answer the questions and respond to one another’s responses by commenting below their answers. Students used pseudonyms to contribute to the blog.

All the data was then organized and imported into Atlas.ti qualitative analysis software and coded according to categories and themes that were identified after reviewing the data several times. Though I approached the study using a new literacies lens and was keen to explore findings that pointed at practices that could be considered

new literacies, I still employed a methodological framework of grounded theory by approaching the analysis inductively (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998b). Though it is implausible to approach a study without bringing personal experience, preconceived notions, and background knowledge to it, it was important to try to approach the coding inductively to stay connected and true to the participants. Some codes that were used include: traditional literacy, new literacy, assessment, frustration, limitation, challenge, advantage, participatory use, democratic use, collaborative use, distributive use, and multimodal use. I analyzed the data of the two case studies together and compared the similarities and differences between them as well. Many of these codes emerged into the findings of the study.

Findings

Overview of School and Case Study Classes

Olympic Heights Secondary, the school of both case study classes, is composed of approximately 1100 students from grades 8-12. This school, located in Western Canada, has three computer labs and a computer station set up in the library. They have two laptop carts that can be signed out and moved from class to class. In the computer lab, teachers can control the screens. For example, if they want students' attention, they can freeze the screens. Also, they are able to monitor students' screens and project a particular image from a computer on a larger screen for sharing with the entire class. The school has an existing wireless structure with some challenges. First, the wireless access is unsecure and second, it is difficult to access the internet in many parts of the school, including the staff room, office, and the portables.

Both of the case study classes have a teacher computer in the class, but no computers for student use. During the three month observation period, the students did not bring their laptops to school and rarely accessed computers around the school unless they were scheduled to do so as part of a classroom activity. To introduce the SNS to their classes, both English teachers took their students to the computer lab and provided instruction on use. The teachers showed students how to sign up for accounts, set up profiles, start their blogs, and upload files including photos. The teachers showed students where discussions should take place on the SNS and gave them requirements that they needed to meet in order to obtain given grades.

Ms Taggart's Class: SNS as Form

At the start of the study, Class One (henceforth referred to as Ms Taggart's class) was beginning the *Romeo and Juliet* Shakespeare unit. Within a week of starting this unit, the SNS was set up and used to supplement the *Romeo and Juliet* unit. It was simultaneously being used for other activities as well. The main use of the site was to stimulate discussion around the play. Ms Taggart would post questions, issues, or thoughts on the SNS's main page shared blog and the students would be required to answer the questions or comment on the issues and thoughts on their own page's blog.

Most of the teacher blog posts required opinion based responses that had the potential for elaborate responses. For example, one question asked, "who do you think was ultimately responsible for Romeo's death? Explain your rationale for this belief." Another question asked, "If you were Friar Lawrence, how would you have advised the star-crossed lovers to proceed in their relationship?" In responding to the questions, students were required to incorporate quotations to back up their points and to

correctly cite the play. For example, the following excerpt shows the formality of one student's response to the question about Friar Lawrence's advice to Romeo and Juliet: "To begin with Friar Lawrence responded with wisdom to Romeo when discussing his relationship with Juliet. The Friar advised Romeo to proceed cautiously and not rush into things by saying 'Wisely and slow; they stumble that run fast' (Act II, scene iii). This foreshadowed events to follow. If I were Friar Lawrence, I would have advised the lovers in this same manner, but taken it further instead of then falling into the mistake of telling them to be deceitful by faking Juliet's death." The student used quotation marks, cited the place she found the quotation, and used formal structure and language including terminology that was being studied in class (foreshadowing) and words from the month's vocabulary list (deceit).

Students' responses to one another's posts were much briefer than their own posts to the question yet continued to maintain a level of formality. The following is an example response in its entirety to the Friar Lawrence post: "I agree with you that Friar Lawrence started by advising Romeo in a much more responsible fashion than his later advice but because his intention was not malicious, I didn't consider his advice to be deceitful. He was just trying to show the Capulets what really matters in life."

Other than commenting on the blog, the students had several in class activities including being quizzed on scenes, writing summaries of acts and taking a final unit test. They also completed an essay, wrote a poem, and took part in a group project that allowed for a variety of modes of expression. Class time spent on the SNS, after the initial set-up and instruction time, was highly limited with this class. Students were required to frequent the SNS regularly to respond to posts on the blog; however, this activity took place outside of class hours.

As a regular homework assignment, Ms Taggart required the students to post their responses to the stated inquiry on their own blog page. Each student was also required to read at least three other students' responses and to comment on their responses. At the end of the unit, each student would receive a grade for his/her contribution to the blog. This would count as students' participation mark and would be worth 10% of their term grade.

The students in Ms Taggart's class mostly used the SNS in Mindset 1 ways that lacked the ethos that Lankshear and Knobel suggest is required for a literacy to be considered new (2007). The findings that will follow at the end of this section will demonstrate that rather than exploring new direction with the tool being used, traditional practices were transferred onto a technologized space.

Ms Reiner's Class: SNS as a New Literacy

At the time of the study start, Class Two (henceforth referred to as Ms Reiner's class) was beginning the *To Kill a Mockingbird* novel unit. Before the start of this unit, the SNS was set up and was used to supplement the unit. Ms Reiner incorporated other classroom activities within the SNS as well. In all, the SNS in Ms Reiner's class was used in five ways. First, similar to Ms Taggart's class, discussion questions were posted on the SNS and students were required to answer these questions and comment on each other's answers. The location for this activity, however, varied from Ms Taggart's class. Ms Reiner posted these discussion questions under the discussion section of the SNS. Students were then required to respond to the questions and consider other people's comments in their responses. Unlike Ms Taggart's class then, all contributions took place in one location. Though students were encouraged to comment on one another's responses, they did not have to veer away from the main discussion to do so. This made

the discussion far more coherent and the final evaluation process of this component simpler.

Second, the individual blog functions of the SNS were used as well. Each student had selected a character, symbol, motif, or other aspect from the novel and was responsible for representing it on the SNS. Therefore, each student's individual blog compiled information about their given topic. For example, the student who had chosen Mrs. Dubose as her character had included information about Morphine and overcoming addiction. She had also written a character study of Mrs. Dubose, and included a post about which Hollywood character she would have chosen to represent her in the movie version of the book with a detailed explanation of her reasons.

Third, because the blog posts only allowed for inclusion of text, Ms Reiner also encouraged students to post photos and videos about their topic onto the Ning site as well. The student who had chosen to cover the book's setting had uploaded photos of camellias and azaleas and embedded videos depicting Alabama. Another student who was focusing on the movie of the book had uploaded photos of the young characters as adults and embedded clips from the movie. She had also chosen Hollywood actors to portray a modern day version of the movie. Along with the photo of one Hollywood actor, she included the following textual exert: "In a modern day movie of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Dakota Fanning would be an ideal actress to play the role of Scout. Like the character of Scout portrayed by Harper Lee, Dakota Fanning is charming and precocious and has the ability to play a tomboy convincingly." Like the students in Ms Taggart's class, Ms Reiner's students too maintained a level of formality in their contributions and tried to use formal language including vocabulary words learnt in class (precocious).

Forth, the SNS was used as a social page that had nothing to do with classroom work. For example, the main page shared blog was used as an informal announcement board where students could post any information that related to the whole class. Some students put out invitations to sporting events, fundraisers, or auditions. For instance, "Come satisfy your sweet tooth by supporting the junior girls basketball team. BAKE SALE tomorrow at lunch." Other types of information that appeared on the shared blog included a plea to assist in finding a lost binder, an announcement to vote for a candidate for student government, and several happy birthday and congratulatory remarks: "Congratulations Jaime for being named to the all-star team. Yay!"

Ms Reiner was pleased to see these types of posts as she understood that it was part of the appeal of the SNS and it would be the type of information that would pull students onto the site regularly. She said, "Part of building a classroom community is that you have to build relationships with one another outside of the classroom context. If we take genuine interest in one another's interest outside of the classroom, then we are more likely to be respectful of one another inside of the classroom. It was great to see the students recognize themselves as a collective and as a community. The Ning site really helped establish that bond, especially the shared blog on the homepage that had nothing to do with class curriculum really."

Finally, the SNS was used as a space to share student work. Work that was completed in offline settings was then uploaded onto the site to be viewed by the entire class. For example, as a supplement to the *To Kill a Mockingbird* unit, the students collaborated in groups and made 90 second anti-racism public service announcements for a video competition. One copy of each group's video was sent to the competition and another copy was uploaded onto the SNS. Much excitement revolved around these videos and the students of Ms Reiner's class showed the videos to students in other classes through the SNS. On the shared blog, much communication developed around both the creation process of the videos as well as the final product. Students asked each

other for tips on how to edit and use special effects on their cameras and made complimentary comments on one another's final products. One student asked, "Does anyone know how to add an old fashion filter using imovie? We just can't figure it out." Another student commented on the original music created by one group: "I love the song you guys wrote. It's really beautiful. You should sing it for the talent show."

Overall, the SNS played two major positive roles in Ms Reiner's class. First, it created a collaborative and respectful classroom environment both in the physical setting as well as the virtual one. Second, through the multimodal inclusion of themes, characters, and settings, the SNS turned into an homage to the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*. It was concluded that the SNS in Ms Reiner's class incorporated the ethos needed to consider it as a new literacy and could therefore be seen as Mindset 2. This point is elaborated in the final segment of the findings section.

Struggling with Assessment

Several themes emerged from the analysis of the study data. First of all, both teachers struggled with issues of assessment around the SNS. Ms Taggart had a difficult time with the assessment process of the SNS for two reasons. First, it became very difficult to track contributions. She had purposely asked students to respond on their own blogs instead of on the main blog where she had posted the questions, so she could then easily go to each student's page to track their progress and offer them feedback. The problem arose when she needed to track how many times each student commented on other's responses: "It was a nightmare, clicking back and forth from one student's main page to the next to see how many times they had commented. Eventually I had to abandon this strategy and consider an alternative assessment option."

The second issue she faced was in grading the responses. She found it difficult to balance the quantity of contributions with the quality, and the content of the contributions with the mechanics of it such as grammar, spelling, and structure. She said, "What should I do? I mean the kid wrote three paragraphs for heaven's sake. Never mind that it took him to the third paragraph to get to the point. Someone else said it all in one sentence. How do I decide what grade to give and is my rationale for the decision a correct one?" Though she attempted to balance these components, she found the process particularly difficult as some entries were mindful and thorough while others were careless and rushed. She had not set requirements on the lengths of posts or the mechanics and therefore found it difficult to procure a cumulative grade. Consequently, she decided to add a final assignment to the unit and have students write a reflection on their contributions to the SNS combined with a grade that they assigned for themselves. This self evaluation had a length requirement of one page single spaced which translated to an average of 600 words per students. Thus the self-evaluation added yet more textual work for the students to complete and for Ms Taggart to assess. "At the end of it all, I don't know if the added assignment made the process much easier because now I had yet one more thing to read."

Like Ms Taggart, Ms Reiner also found the final evaluation process of the SNS contributions to be difficult. At the start of the unit, she had told students that their contributions to the SNS would be worth 15% of their final grade. Ms Reiner had not further elaborated on the assessment criteria as she herself had not considered it in full. For example, she had not decided whether she would deduct grades from students who neglected to upload their projects and videos onto the site. She had not considered whether she would grade student contributions as a whole or grade individual components separately. She was unsure how to grade the contributions submitted in different modes and whether she should grade them based on the time it would take to

complete them, the overall content, the relevance to the unit, or other criteria. She said, “I wasn’t sure whether it was appropriate for me to give a student credit for uploading a photograph of an actor or if I should give marks for the technical competence of using movie making software. I wanted to give them credit because they were able to get the content across well using that medium. It’s just I’m so use to giving grades based on well written work with correct grammar, mechanics, and sentence structure. It’s tough to revision the idea of what constitutes strong work. You can show deep understanding using different media and that is the point of doing this. But then I worry that I’ll be seen as a less academic minded teacher by my colleagues.”

Furthermore, because there was much activity in a variety of different sections of the site, Ms Reiner found it difficult and time consuming to be able to segregate each student’s contribution to grade. She had begun to see the SNS as a cumulative and collaborative project of her entire class and did not like having to piece it up for assessment purposes. “I really just want to give the whole class an A for their excellent collaborative effort. Just look at the site, it truly does the novel honor. They achieved this as a group. I don’t really want to go in now and say well the site is mostly as good as it is because of the A+ contributions of Jim, Jane, and Johnny, but thanks to the rest of you for playing a supporting role.” Ms Reiner innately felt Lankshear and Knobel’s (2007) concept of the ethos and valued the SNS as a participatory and collaborative space that was not dominated by experts.

Had she considered these issues ahead of time, she said she would have perhaps told the class that they would have received a shared grade as well as an individual one for the different components. For the current year, she decided that she would give a holistic grade on the general contributions of each student to the SNS and then separate grades for the *To Kill a Mockingbird* discussions taking place under the discussion section and the *To Kill a Mockingbird* topic project that took place on the personal blogs and throughout the site. Because she had already assigned grades for other projects, such as the anti-racism video, outside of the SNS space, she did not consider it as a new contribution on the online space. Therefore, students who had completed the video project but neglected to upload it onto Ning were not penalized. Ms Reiner said, “I don’t think I like the idea of offering an incentive for students to post their projects on the site because I see that there is already an intrinsic motivation to do so. Also, I want to respect students’ rights not to make their work public.”

The tensions between incorporating traditional and new literacies within the classroom were at its peak when it came to assessment time. It required the teachers to look at the SNS in a different manner than they had approached past assignments. The assessment strategies that they had learnt over time did not mesh well with this new tool and they found themselves wishing that there was somewhere to turn to for answers. With a lack of funds and workshops, both teachers found themselves having to conceive new strategies to help them cope. In so doing, without their knowledge, they are starting to become leaders in their school when it comes to digital literacy practices by conceiving new ways of using new tools and creating strategies around implementation, assessment, and classroom management.

An Onerous Task for Teachers

Taking part in the SNS brought forth issues of management and organization that were not considered by either teacher at the onset of the project causing the teachers a far larger work load than anticipated. Without a change in school culture and an adequate background in new literacies, the teachers found it difficult to implement creative

practices on the SNS or come up with logistical solutions that would assist with time management and organization.

Keeping track of the posts required hours of work on a weekly basis for Ms Taggart. Though she had an excellent connection and a high level of respect for her students, she felt the need to closely inspect the posts in case inappropriate or embarrassing materials were added: “I was worried that someone might write something cruel about someone else or make some sort of offensive remark. I’d hate to have what was meant to be an inspired idea end with parents and administrators in my room.”

Like Ms Taggart, Ms Reiner found the process of maintaining the SNS consumed a large amount of her time. She too was vigilant to make sure students did not post inappropriate information. This was especially of concern to her on the shared blog where students were posting personal information: “Can you imagine? ‘Party at my house tomorrow night. BYOB.’ Or ‘someone tell Ted to wear some deodorant.’ It could have been disastrous.”

Also, because of the sensitive nature of the topics covered in the *To Kill a Mockingbird* unit, Ms Reiner felt she needed to carefully inspect posts for intentional or unintentional racist, sexist, or classist comments. Neither issue caused a problem, and with time Ms Reiner became less vigilant. Though some such comments did appear, usually in subtle ways, they triggered debate and students themselves addressed the opinions through discussion. For example, when one student posted that “poor people don’t work as hard as rich people” and subsequently don’t make as much money, there was a deluge of responses both supporting and opposing the comment. A mostly respectful written conversation pursued and was continued orally in the classroom setting with teacher facilitation.

Nevertheless, both teachers lost much personal and professional time invigilating the blog to make sure all content was classroom appropriate. They regularly logged on to the site both from school and home to review student posts and comments.

An Onerous Task for Students

Taking part in the SNS was time consuming for the students as well. In fact, students in both classes found themselves with far more writing tasks while on the SNS than with work done outside of the SNS. This was further compounded by the fact that they not only had to write weekly posts, but also had to read each other’s contributions in order to comment on them.

The students in Ms Taggart’s class had two major complaints about using the SNS for school. The first complaint was that the class SNS was not really a social network. It was simply a place to post their work. It acted merely as a public notebook and not as a place to connect with each other. One student said, “I don’t think Ms Taggart has a Facebook account because if she did she would know that you don’t put things in quotes or say where you found them or give evidence for things.” Another student said, “there is NOTHING social about this social network. It’s actually antisocial. I mean, when was the last time you pretended to be Friar Lawrence?” A third student said, “My favorite thing about Facebook is sharing photos and videos and connecting with my friends and sharing things we like. All we do on Ning is write stuff. It doesn’t feel anything like Facebook.” Similar to Leander’s laptop study (2007), these students found themselves conducting offline practices in an online setting.

The second complaint was that the work required for the SNS was far too much for the percentage of the term’s grade that it would be allocated. Students recognized that for a mere 10% of their grade, they produced more work than they had produced

for the other 90%. One student said, “This is crazy. I’ve written as much as like 10 term papers in posts and comments and for what, 10%. Are you kidding me? That’s like 1% per essay. It’s just not worth it.” Another student said, “I’ve written more for this assignment than I have for all the other assignments in all my other classes combined.”

The concerns of Ms Taggart’s students did seem legitimate. For example, the students who received a mark higher than 60% on this component of their grade produced over double the text as they did with all other class activities combined. Though responding to the blogs happened in short spurts throughout the semester, the overall quantity of the work produced surpassed the written work required on the essay, poem, project, quizzes, summaries, and test. Three students chose purposely to abandon contributing to the SNS as they surmised that the amount of effort they had to put in was not worth the 10% grade. One of these students provided the following rationale: “After the first week, I figured out I could do none of the work on the SNS and still end up with an A. Which essentially translates to ‘I can do less than 50% of the class work and still end up with an A.’ Flaw in the system, wouldn’t you say? Even in English class, it pays to be good in Math.” All three of these students, however, did continue to frequent the SNS to assist them in studying for the unit test and write the act summaries. One of them said, “It sure acted as an excellent study guide though. I doubt I would have done as well on the test without it.”

The students in Ms Reiner’s class also produced inordinate amounts of information for their site. Though there were enormous amounts of textual work posted on this class’s SNS, most students did not complain about the amount of work they had to contribute to the site. However, like Ms Taggart’s students, they did complain about the assessment. The majority of students commented that they wished the SNS was worth more than 15% of their term grade. The following are three comments from three students. Jet said, “I put a lot of time and effort into the work I contributed [to the SNS] so I wish that the effort I put in would show on my final grade. Overall though I don’t see that it will be. I still enjoyed doing it though” Brady said, “Because we spent such a huge portion of class focusing on our class site, it would have been nice to reap the benefits in terms of grades. We probably would have all gotten A’s.” Anika said, “This is the best project I’ve ever done. I wish it were worth more marks.”

Other Points of Concern

Students in both Ms Taggart’s and Ms Reiner’s classes brought forth other issues about their participation in the SNS. Firstly, Five students from each class said that they preferred not to make their work public, especially when they had not produced their best work. Jenna said, “Sometimes I didn’t answer the questions on purpose because I didn’t want people to think I was dumb.” Riley said, “If I was in a rush, I’d prefer not to post anything at all instead of posting something lame that others would laugh at.” Jordana said, “If I wasn’t sure about the question, I’d prefer not to answer at all than take a guess and be wrong. I’d have to wait till other people responded to make sure my response wasn’t totally off.”

Secondly, four students in Ms Reiner’s class and three in Ms Taggart’s class complained that work on the SNS could not be done while riding the bus to school or at other times a computer or internet access were not available. One student said, “It bugged me that I could no longer get my English homework done in Math class.” Though a few students did contribute to the site through their mobile devices, these contributions were short in nature.

Thirdly, the teachers (especially Ms Taggart) were still using the SNS in way that allowed them to maintain their authoritative position. According to Hodas (1993) this

will inhibit the technology from changing the culture of schooling. Both teachers directed the manner in which the SNS developed. They were the one's that posted all the discussion questions and the one's who came up with the issues to be explored and assignments to be completed. Ms Reiner included sections of the SNS that were not teacher directed and therefore started to move toward a change in school culture.

Lastly, several students in Ms Taggart's class saw no difference in the SNS compared to their regular assignment. In fact, they went so far as answering the posed questions on a word processor first, saving it, and then returning to it at a later time to edit it and then copy and paste it into the appropriate spot on the SNS. Kyla said, "It just felt like I was writing an essay every other day and then pasting it on the site. I wanted to make sure my spelling and grammar were correct so I typed the answers in Word before transferring it to the blog." Sasha said, "The only real difference [with the SNS] was where our work ended up. Usually it's on a piece of paper. This time it was on a website." Again, the ethos here was lacking as students simply transferred offline practices onto an online space making it a Mindset 1 practice.

Finding the Ethos

Despite the frustrations that arose, students in both Ms Taggart's and Ms Reiner's classes enjoyed several aspects of using the SNS for school purposes. First, they liked that their peers would see their work and comment on their contributions. Brooke said, "It was nice having more than just the teacher looking at our work." Elijah said, "I would look forward to seeing other people's comments of my posts." Kourosh said, "I put in more effort than usual since I knew my friends would be seeing my work." The SNS gave their work an authenticity beyond learning because others were seeing it and commenting on their work. Because student work and opinions were more distributed than with other work, both the SNS's did have ethos in this respect moving it closer to the second mindset.

Second, students appreciated the fact that they were allowed to read their peers' answers to a question before posting answers themselves. Eliza said, "It really helped looking at some other answers before coming up with my own." Jackson said, "This was the first time in my life that I could openly see someone else's response before forming my own opinion. I'd do it before, but was worried I'd get into trouble. With the SNS it was actually a part of the process." It felt like they were learning from one another and adding to each other's contributions rather than plagiarizing. This was especially an added bonus for weaker students who frequently struggled with homework. Having example answers helped them develop their own answers. This was seen as a form of collaboration moving the SNS closer to a new literacy.

Third, the students liked that they were able to do their homework without needing pen, paper, and notebooks: "Most of my homework and almost all of my class work is done with pen and paper. We write in-class essays in Socials, we do hand written lab reports in science, we write our math problems in our notebook. Even in PE, we keep track of our fitness progress on a log that we keep in duotangs." This simple act of providing a different outlet added some motivation to school tasks.

Lastly, students acknowledged that they spent much more time working on their responses than they would have if it were only going to be a homework check grade that nobody would see or only work that the teacher would see. Though the excessive amount of work was a frustration for the majority of the students, especially in Ms Taggart's class, the students did acknowledge that overall they did produce more work and were more diligent during the writing process. This supports King & O'Brien's (2002) notion that students will learn print literacies while engaged in digital literacies.

Two more advantages to using an SNS were noted in Ms Reiner's class, but not in Ms Taggart's. These particular advantages pointed directly to the fact that Ms Reiner was using the SNS as a new literacy. First, several of the students said that the SNS helped create a closer classroom community. For example, Jet said "I made connections with all sorts of people I usually wouldn't have gotten to know." The site was a collaborative space that allowed for a range of participation opportunities resulting in connections being built between students.

Second, nine students mentioned that the SNS acted as a bridge between less and more popular students and helped bond the genders. Sylvia said, "I'm really shy, so I never talk to anyone in class. But I was talking to people on our site and so people would come up to me and talk to me in class." Brady said, "It was much easier to talk to the girls in class because now there was a common topic to talk about." The fact that the site started to create a different culture around schooling by bringing forth issues of identity, connectivity, and community point to its potential to continue to grow as a new literacy.

Discussion

I consider both Ms Taggart and Ms Reiner as digital pioneers because they looked to implement new technologies and practices within the curriculum. They were both constantly learning about new teaching and learning tools and attempting to incorporate them into their practices. Both teachers believed that it was important for students to be familiar with new online environments and worried that if they did not provide the opportunity for them to partake in a school setting, that those students who would not partake on their own accord would be disadvantaged in society. Both identified SNS's as motivational tools that had the potential to get students excited about learning.

Ms Reiner further implemented a SNS, not solely for the sake of the tool itself or its motivational value, but because of her belief that the SNS, beyond being a new technology, was a literacy that held enormous potential for expression. Just the same way as we teach our students to write or at least allow them the opportunity to do so, we might consider allowing opportunities for students to express themselves using images, video, text, sound, hyperlinks, and other modes. Connecting these modes and understanding the relationships that they hold with one another and with learners and providing opportunities for students to use them in spaces that allow for collaboration and distribution make learning more authentic.

The teachers began using an SNS because they wanted to improve their practice and stay current. Also, they wanted to use new resources that may be beneficial in student learning. They were both particularly interested in enhancing student motivation and creating respectful classroom environments. Though the teachers had similar aims and were using the same tool in the attempt to reach their goals, substantial differences were identified in how the SNS was used by teachers and their students.

Ms Taggart's SNS acted as a space to conduct discussion. It was a public space for students to answer questions and it allowed for enhanced collaboration for homework completion. Ms Reiner's SNS served a similar purpose, but went further by employing a variety of other uses and encouraging multimodal contribution. The site can be compared to a picture book where the images and texts work together to tell one story. If we were to erase one of the modes, the story would be incomplete and incomprehensible. Both modes are necessary to understand the full story. So was the case with Ms Reiner's SNS. The text, images, sounds, and videos worked together to create a multimodal classroom environment, literacy space, and literacy within itself. Because of the manner in which the site was used, I identified it as a new literacy.

Tensions will continue to grow between traditional literacies, where text is valued as the primary and most important way to express ourselves, and new literacies, where multimodal expression has the ability to incorporate text along with an array of other media. Proponents of traditional literacies may fear its value lessening over time as more and more focus is put on different modes and new literacies emerge, or existing literacies are identified as new literacies. The goal of new literacies, though, is not to value one literacy over another, dispel any literacy, or deem it valueless when it stands alone. Rather, it aims to include different modes, genres, and practices to the array of what we already have identified and valued.

With the growth of new literacies, tensions and challenges will emerge. Both teachers faced such struggles. For example, the teachers had difficulties in developing assessment strategies around the SNS. Neither teacher had set out a detailed plan or created rubrics for evaluation of the SNS. They had both told their students that a holistic grade would be assigned for the cumulative work each student contributed to the site and that this would be their participation grade for the term. Therefore, once it was time to start the evaluation process, both teachers found themselves facing an organizational nightmare, much uncertainty, and hours of unanticipated grading time. This became particularly a frustrating point when teachers compared the time they had spend in the past for granting students participation grades. Both teachers admitted that they did not have a system set in place for that either, but that they could quickly derive a grade in a few minutes based on their recollection of students' oral participation. Therefore, a few minutes of work turned into several days.

This was one instance that highlighted the continued tensions between incorporating new literacies and sticking to traditional ones in classroom settings. Teachers had to balance their existing practices with their new ones and make decisions as to whether or not these new practices held adequate advantages to continue using over former teaching strategies that held their own incentives. Because there were very few opportunities for these teachers to learn more about such practices or network with fellow teachers, it is possible that they may abandon such practices. However, because they are at a school where the administration is in support of new literacies, it is likely that they will find the funds and time needed to expand their learning to develop their new practices if they seek the assistance. The deciding factor for the direction they choose to go may quite possibly be how they perceive these tensions and if they value the new literacy enough to develop it instead of abandoning it for a former traditional practice that better suits the traditional structure of schooling in which they currently teach.

The students in both classes produced large amounts of written work on the SNS's. Both teachers saw this as a major advantage in using the site. At the end of the unit both teachers were searching for strategies as to how they could maintain the quantity of student work but lessen their own marking load creating yet another tension between traditional and new literacies. Furthermore, a tension between modes was identified when comparing writing quantity to oral contribution. Though enhanced written work is a noteworthy goal, I did find it problematic that this focus overshadowed other modes of expression and learning. For example, though both teachers had assigned grades for oral participation in past classes, this grade was replaced by the SNS grade and no other grade was given for students' oral contributions.

As a result, the use of the SNS lessened formal oral discussion in both classes. In past years, both teachers assigned similar questions to what they had posted on the SNS for students to complete in their notebooks and would then review the answers to these questions orally in class. Because the responses were now textually available on the

SNS for everyone to view and students were required to textually comment on one another's questions, there was no longer the need to review the questions orally in class. Even if a question was discussed orally in class, contributions were not taken into consideration when granting a participation mark. Overall, a substantial portion of the class that was previously dedicated to oral participation was replaced by other activities. Consequently, formal oral discussion lessened significantly in both classes. Because of the shift in discussion from the physical oral classroom discourse to the online textual classroom discourse, the participation grade was now assigned based on students' written contributions to the SNS as oppose to their oral contributions in the physical classroom setting.

However, informal discussion around both curriculum based and extracurricular activities enhanced in Ms Reiner's class. Students frequently talked to one another about information that was posted on the SNS. They did this both outside of class time and in class as well. Though these were not formal discussions facilitated by the teacher, they were still important discourses that assisted in the learning process and in creating a respectful classroom community. This same increase in informal discussion was not noted in Ms Taggart's class.

Both teachers continued to dedicate some time for classroom discussion, but this was far more limited than before the implementation of the SNS. Furthermore, much of the in class conversations were an extension of the discussions that were started on the SNS. The teachers would make references to comments made on the site and then build on those points. Though this had the positive affect of linking the online and offline spaces of the classroom community, it became problematic for students who were not keeping up with the SNS. When the discussion referred to an online discussion, those students who were not up to date with the online discussion were lost and not able to participate in the oral discussion taking place within the physical classroom setting.

At the start of both classes, student motivation was enhanced by the use of the SNS. The majority of students appreciated its novelty and were pleased with the opportunity to work in online environments. In Ms Taggart's class, however, this novelty quickly died and most students associated the site with a heavy workload. By the end of the unit, many students even resented the use of the site because of the amount of extra daily work it had given them. In contrast, the motivation level of Ms Reiner's class enhanced as time went on. As the site developed and more images, videos, and comments were posted, students' interest in visiting the site enhanced. They were especially interested to check the announcements posted by their peers on the shared blog and in checking to see if anyone had commented on their contributions.

One aspect of the SNS that students in both classes appreciated was the fact that they could share homework responses. Not only was it not considered cheating to look over someone else's answer before contributing your own, this practice was for once encouraged. Students could learn from one another and better understand the questions before responding themselves. Because the posted questions were open ended ones, there was much room for variety in opinions. Although the SNS allowed students to see one another's responses, it discouraged plagiarism as it became obvious when students had the same answers. Unique comments needed to be derived—or at least unique ways of stating the same ideas needed to be conceived. This was another major tension that arose between new and traditional literacies. Both teachers and students had to come to terms with the idea that reading someone else's homework and pulling from their work to conceive their own thoughts was a legitimate collaborative practice and not a short cut.

Lastly, both classes' online environments were brought to an abrupt end when the district decided to block Ning from being accessible. Both teachers and students responded to this ban with surprise, confusion, and anger. Both teachers were angered that the sites that they had put so much time and effort into building were no longer accessible when on school board property. They were further confused why the district would have decided to ban the site. Students were angered that they were being policed and it made them curious as to what it was specifically about Ning that made the district want to ban it. Their curiosity, therefore, led them to be further interested in different Ning sites and to explore different people's networks from home. The district's ban, therefore, had the opposite affect than it intended.

Though several of Ms Taggart's students admitted to being pleased that the SNS was coming to an end because it represented an end to the large amounts of work, most student were angered that their work was now not visible to anyone accessing it through the district. Overall, this ban reinvigorated their efforts and excitement about the SNS. One student even found a way to bypass the ban and showed it to Ms Taggart.

Conclusion

Even though image and multimedia are becoming increasingly prevalent, text still dominates especially in educational setting and academia. It is rare to see a theoretical piece in any form other than a traditional print paper. Even with attempts to incorporate new technologies and literacies in classes, as teachers we fail to employ these literacies in novel ways (Williams & Rowlands, 2007). Rather, we take an already existing genre and require the content to be presented with the new technology as its form rather than seeing the new technology as a new literacy or genre in itself. For example, when presenting with PowerPoint software we rely mostly on text formatted in point form. We rarely include visuals, audio, or video in our presentations.

In the attempt to stay current, educators are beginning to incorporate social media tools more frequently in their classes. Blogs and SNS's are being used more regularly to encourage curriculum based discourse outside of classroom walls. Paradoxically, we are approaching these SNS's and blogs in the same manner as conventional essays. We still encourage our students to provide analytical text quoting literature with citations included. Formal conventions are encouraged instead of more conversational text that is the norm with social media, and the inclusion of visuals and multimedia is almost nonexistent. Furthermore, this type of activity is starting to replace grades formerly granted for oral classroom discussion. Therefore, not only is a new literacy not being introduced, but worse, oral literacy (which formerly received a modicum grade) is now being completely devalued.

Consequently, it is not possible to identify new forms such as blogs and SNS as new literacies without considering the manner in which they are being used. Rather, each instance needs to be regarded and assessed individually. Alternatively, it is possible to assess new technologies and new social tools for their potential in developing into new literacies and explore ways that they are being used and follow the ways in which they grow.

Though tensions do arise between new and traditional literacies, new literacies, in fact, offer a relief to traditional classroom practices as they allow us to value an array of modes that can assist in the learning process. I suggest that instead of placing a hierarchical value on different literacies, we aim to see literacy through a folksonomy lens where the hierarchy of literacy practices are flattened and can connect to one another through a variety of possible connections or be enjoyed individually through its innate characteristics.

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