Engaging 21st Century Writers with Social Media

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Chapter 7
Reblogging as Writing:
The Role of Tumblr in the Writing Classroom

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores how multimodal composition and social media conventions can support writing and introduce students to writing to multiple audiences. This chapter will outline an assignment from logistics of Tumblr as a space to help students establish regular writing practices in online spaces. Additionally, this chapter will illustrate some aspects of resistance that students may have with the assignment and provide strategies that respond to these resistances to make the assignment more effective.

INTRODUCTION

Students are writing more now than ever before. This is due to what Andrea Lundsford (2013) referred to in her study on the writing habits of Stanford University freshmen as "life writing": text messages, tweets, status updates; most of their communication is facilitated by smart phones, tablets and social media applications. Yet, even with this increase in writing they do on their own time, when students enter the writing classroom, some students may still struggle with the composing process; sometimes the very act of writing seems daunting, and often they wonder how the writing we ask them to do will be applicable to them outside the classroom and in their future careers.

Writing teachers struggle as well to find ways to help students see that writing is not just a classroom activity, but will benefit them in their professional and civic communities for the rest of their lives. If writing teachers can find ways to capitalize on these "life writing" skills, there may be more opportunities to provide richer moments for context-specific writing, where scenarios replicate the kinds of writing students will encounter in professional capacities, at the same time giving them reasons to think more critically about who their audience is. While incorporating social media seems like a useful way to help students transition from life writing to academic writing to professional writing, the challenge for writing instructors is to find ways to use these applications in purposeful ways that complement the learning objectives of writing courses.

This chapter outlines a meaningful approach to incorporating social media into the writing classroom that gives students the opportunity to think about writing in larger situations than writing essays for their teachers. Using Tumblr in particular, students can explore the writing process in their future professions and develop regular writing habits by composing messages with text and images according to social media conventions.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Tracing Technology in Writing

The availability of technology has had a large impact on writing. As The New London Group (1996) wrote, "New communications media are reshaping the way we use language…that effective citizenship and productive work now require that we interact effectively using multiple languages, multiple Englishes, and communication patterns that more frequently cross cultural, community, and national boundaries" (p. 64). While new media scholars were noticing the impact of new media in all communication areas, educators have been slow to acknowledge these changes in practice. While people in professional and personal settings were more often using tools that allowed them to communicate in words, images, and sounds, Takayoshi and Selfe (2007) argued that, "*inside* many of these classrooms, students are producing essays that look much the same as those produced by their parents and grandparents" (p. 2). While technology was increasingly giving users the opportunity to write in new ways to reach larger audiences, students were still being prepared to write essays that catered to a very specific, scholarly audience, and not to the audiences they would encounter in their future careers or personal lives.

In her 2009 report to the National Council of the Teachers of English, Kathleen Blake Yancey argued that writing in the 21st century was "a call to help our students compose often, well and through these composings, become citizen writers of the country, citizen writers of the world, and citizen writers of the future" (p. 1). She, too, stressed the need to prepare our students for writing outside the classroom. To do that, educators must evolve how they teach writing along with how people write in situations outside the classroom. One way to respond to this call is to take writing off the printed page. Takayoshi and Selfe contend that students should be "composing in multiple modalities, if they hope to communicate successfully within the digital communication networks that characterize workplaces, schools, civic life, and span traditional cultural, national, geopolitical borders" (p. 3). Faigley (2003) further argues, "I can think of no scenario for the revival of public discourse that does not involve digital media" (p. 179). If students are to understand that writing and communication in their lives goes beyond the printed essays they are asked to write in the classroom, they need to practice with the ubiquitous tools and spaces they use in other facets of their lives.

To have students understand that writing, especially the writing they already do, is a social action where they can interact with larger audiences than their teacher and peers, then they must write for audiences beyond the four walls of the classroom. Finding opportunities for students to do this is imperative. While educators are quick to acknowledge technology is changing the shape of communication, integrating digital writing in the public sphere into the classroom remains a slow process. And with social media facilitating so much global digital communication, this integration is crucial.

To respond to these changes in technology, educators must rethink writing in the classroom. Clark (2010) writes:

The future of writing–based on a global, collaborative text, where all writing has the potential to become public–informs our classrooms and forms a new 'digital' imperative, one that asks how we can reshape our pedagogy with new uses of the technologies that are changing our personal and professional lives. (p. 28)

Teachers must not only think about technology's potential as a tool for writing, but about how it can promote writing and become part of the writing process in meaningful ways. Santos and Leahy (2014) believe that "[e]ducation in the digital era means acting as architects who design learning spaces, not as suppliers delivering a product" (p. 86). Educators can address this digital imperative by helping students explore the writing process with social media, rather than have them view social media as an end product.

As students will be writing in these spaces for more than just personal communication, they must be prepared to think about how audiences communicate not only through social media, but also in other digital spaces and situations beyond the research essay. Because of these considerations, the complexities of writing on social media are also worth exploring as a class as well. As Wolff (2014) argues, social media are "spaces for writing that, like more traditional print-based writing, have their own grammars, styles and linguistics" (p. 212). Tumblr in particular can allow students to delve into writing in a public space where they can practice using these different styles for social media and examine how they can relate to the writing they will do in various situations and with various audiences.

Tumblr as a Tool for Writing

Tumblr is a microblogging[1] site where users compose short posts. While it includes tools similar to those found in other social media applications such as, liking a post and/or replying to a post–which is equivalent to leaving a comment–there are also some differences that make it more flexible for writing in the classroom. It can be used for more conventional writing activities, such as daily responses or free-writing that can get students in the habit of practicing writing. Tumblr can also be used to explore writing and composing in different forms, such as images and source sharing.

Tumblr supports multimedia content such as video and images, and allows for more than 140 characters, unlike Twitter, which is also a microblogging site. The Tumblr site encourages users to "put anything they want" on their blogs ("Tumblr," n. d.). This self-described openness to different types of content can encourage students to explore all the possibilities of what writing can be. Because Tumblr makes it easy to integrate multiple modes of composition, it is a more functional social media site for slightly longer writing exercises. While Twitter can be helpful for conciseness, Tumblr provides a little more room for expository writing.

Visuals

Although Tumblr offers more room for text-based writing, its microblogging status comes from its emphasis on small-scale bits of information, most often through visuals. Because it facilitates visuals, students can also experiment with and explore how to use images to convey messages and respond to audiences' different information needs, which is important for the kinds of large-scale communication that students will be a part of in their professional discourses.

Among the most common posts on Tumblr are memes or gifs. Memes are images, videos or GIFs (animated images) that are passed among users online, making them viral and becoming recognizable and

commonplace to large audiences. Dawkins (1976) defined memes as ways cultural information spread (p. 192). They become a part of cultural moments that appeal to large audiences and they are often altered and parodied to respond to other cultural moments. Because Tumblr so easily supports multimedia, as well as longer, text-based blog posts, it is a space that gives students the opportunity to think about using all the available means of composition for responses – text, still images, film, and audio. This is important, especially as multimodal texts become more commonplace in professional communication.

Information across many professional discourses often includes images or hyperlinks, especially as many of documents are created to read online. In fact, Mike Isaac (2015) recently reported in *The New York Times* that GIFs are even making their way into professional discourse with people including them in email conversations. Again, practicing the meaningful use of memes and GIFS in various situations prepare students to compose for audiences that are becoming increasingly used to reading short content and expect to find their information in a variety of modes.

Reblogging

Reblogging is another capability of Tumblr that can help students think about collaborative writing and sharing sources. Reblogging is when a user reposts another user's content in a way that gives credit to the original poster. The original post is accompanied by notes, which are an account of who has reblogged the post and where it has been reblogged. This allows students to think about writing as social action in terms of collaboration and sharing.

In reblogging, whether by simply reposting as the post originally was or adding to it by including additional information by replying with a comment, users are entering into and extending a conversation, giving others the opportunity to become part of the conversation and keep it going. Reblogging and commenting show how social media can be a beneficial tool to teach students about the collaborative nature of writing. They can understand the importance of being a part of and sharing information with community. They can also think about their own credibility as a source of information contributing to an existing conversation. And as a part of this, they can reflect on the rhetorical choice of what they reblog and the decisions they make regarding best information or mode of writing to contribute to their community.

Lunsford, Fishman, and Liew (2013) found that interacting through writing with their professional communities built "a sense of purposeful connection between students and their writing, allowing them to see that writing as something of worth" (p. 479). If students are reblogging posts from their professional communities, they can see the relevant topics of information for their field while becoming an active part of these discussions. The use of Tumblr can help students begin to make connections between their professional communities and their writing and to see that writing does have consequences outside the classroom.

Diverse Voices

Another facet of Tumblr that makes it a rich environment for writing in the classroom is that Tumblr users focus more on topics and issues, rather than focusing on crafting identities and connecting with people a user knows or wants to know. People often remain anonymous and still make meaningful contributions to discussions. It is not necessarily considered unethical to go by a pseudonym on Tumblr. While this Tumblr convention of anonymity does not always make the conversations richer, it does provide

the potential for voices or stories that are often overlooked to be heard. In fact many users join Tumblr under a pseudonym so they can post more freely as the person they identify as and about issues they are passionate about without the backlash of possibly insensitive opposition.

Communities involved with issues of race and LGBT use Tumblr as a space for discussion because it can be more empowering to discuss these issues safely without the fear of repercussion. As feminist scholar Moya Bailey stated, "I see many more diverse images on Tumblr than I see anywhere else. It's one of the few places where I see fat people, trans women and trans women of color who are celebrated" (as qtd. in Safronova, 2014). Having access to a space where students can observe a diverse group of voices talking about diverse issues in ways they may have not seen before can be critical to helping students understand audience, the power of writing, and how the rhetorical situation of communication on social media can be much larger than their immediate surroundings and can contribute to much larger cultural conversations.

METHODOLOGY AND PEDAGOGY

In the classes I teach at the University of Delaware (UD), I prepare students to become professional writers such as medical writers, technical writer, public relation specialists, editors, etc. To prepare them, I ask them to write in genres and scenarios they will likely encounter in the workforce such as memos and proposals. Increasingly this has also included social media and how to consider its use in professional situations. Although students communicate on social media daily, I found that many of my students struggled to make the connection between the writing they did on social media in their personal lives with writing they may do in other contexts, such as school or work.

Because so much communication occurs on social media, students must be prepared to think about how audiences interact with information in these spaces. Writing has changed in large part because of how people read online. Audiences need to consume and share information quickly, so timeliness and length of writing is important to consider. A 2012 study by the Smart Data Collective found that a personal Facebook status of 70 characters or less will get 66% more engagement than a status that is more than 231 characters. That is a significant writing situation for students to consider, and the earlier students start to think about writing to those situations, the better. Creating short posts and images will be a beneficial and useful writing experience for them, and using social media in the classroom can promote this.

To address this, I asked my students to regularly write on Tumblr throughout the semester to practice writing in a space other than traditional notebooks, Microsoft Word documents or discussion boards. The major goals of the assignment were for students:

- Develop a rhetorical understanding of writing in different modes according to different social media conventions;
- Develop an understanding of writing as a process through regular writing practice; and
- Explore professional discourse on Tumblr.

By writing in a public space, students could see writing with an audience other than me as their teacher and practice responding to the diverse rhetorical situations of writing in social media at the same time as simply practicing writing. Students started with smaller writing exercise, responding to specific prompts or discussion. I also asked them to respond with various modes popular on Tumblr, including

text-based posts, images (including memes and gifs), videos, links, and reblogs. Additionally, I required that each post include a hashtag in order to categorize it into both classroom conversation and larger, public conversations. As the assignment progressed, I began to ask students to write some posts on their own without any constraints. The Tumblr site also became a space to post in-class activities, as well as a repository of sources available for larger research projects comprised of the articles the students posted.

PARTICIPANTS

I used this assignment in a class I taught in the English Department at UD, "Topics in Professional Writing." This particular class was focused on professional uses of social media. For example, the class examined topics such as how NASA used Twitter or how social media was used for emergency response during Hurricane Sandy. The students were primarily sophomore, junior, and senior English majors with a concentration in Professional Writing, but additionally there was a Business major, Engineering Major and Food Science major taking the class to complete their second writing requirement.

These students were considered what Prensky (2001) coined a "digital native"; they had spent their entire lives surrounded by technology and do not remember a time without it. Every single one of them had their own laptop, tablet, or at the very least, a smart phone, that they brought to class. In fact, because the class was about social media, I encouraged them to bring whatever technology they felt comfortable using in class to work on. While many of them were familiar with social media applications like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Snap Chat, after doing an informal, oral survey of the class, I found that only a couple of students had used Tumblr.

EXPLORATION

To give students an understanding of the various kinds of writing on Tumblr, I began the semester-long assignment by asking students to analyze different Tumblr accounts, exploring the writing that was done on Tumblr in discourses they were interested investigating the social media conventions that are specific to Tumblr and the kinds of rhetorical choices, both effective and ineffective, that were made in those accounts. Banks (2006) writes that it is important for students to learn not only how to use the tools, but, "individually and collectively to be able to use critique, resist, design and change technologies in ways that are relevant to their lives and needs, rather than those of the corporations that hope to sell them" (p. 41). Students should be able to decide how these spaces are going to work for them and their own communicative purposes, rather than use them blindly.

They should also understand how the space works for the rhetorical situation at hand and what choices will be best for audiences to interact with information. I encouraged students to look at Tumblr accounts that were related to their interests or future professions. For example, students interested in doing social media marketing followed digital media website, *Mashable's* Tumblr, and students interested in publishing followed the publishing house, Harper Collin's Tumblr. The class took note of the tone of the posts, the mode of the posts, what hashtags were being used, whom they followed and how they interacted with other accounts. This gave students the chance to see the difference between personal, informal content and how Tumblr can be used professionally.

The kinds of images that were integrated into the professional posts and how the professional posts used memes effectively were likewise analyzed. We also spent time analyzing the layouts of various accounts and how some templates aided in facilitating information delivery better than others. For example, if the hashtags for each post were on the side of the post, it was easier to see how they are categorized or what the post might be about than if the hashtags were at the very bottom of the post.

COMPOSING ON TUMBLR

Creating Accounts

When students were ready to put their Tumblr to practice, I invited them to a group Tumblr for the class. Each student needed a Tumblr account to participate in the group blog; many students already had a personal account, but they decided to create a new account to keep their personal and professional thoughts separate. This was helpful as many students worried about their classmates and me as the teacher having access to parts of their personal lives. This also opened up a space to discuss professional identities. As I discussed earlier, the anonymous aspect of Tumblr is important, but for the purpose of the class, there did need to be some visibility to see who was writing what, especially as students moved into investigating their professional discourses. How they crafted their Tumblr profile was aided by the research they did into their professional discourses. They were able to see how others in their field presented themselves or their organizations. By creating a more professional online persona, students were learning how to build their own ethos as they began to interact in these professional conversations and build their professional literacy in terms of how to represent themselves.

In addition to navigating personal and professional writing on Tumblr, many students were also concerned with navigating a new space. To help remove this fear or anxiety about writing in a new space, the first half of a 75-minute class period was set-aside for students to set up their accounts. While we were not in a computer lab, all students in the class had a laptop, tablet or smart phone with them to set up their accounts. This in-class time could also be used for instructors to present a tutorial on how to post different content to the Tumblr, as well as how to reblog posts and how to comment on posts. The class, as a group, also decided on the template for the account and considered how the interface of the Tumblr template could better help readers access their information.

Posting Content

To encourage the habit of writing, I asked students to contribute to the class Tumblr a total of five times a week for the rest of the semester. They responded to specific prompts I gave them or responded to a reading, either in-class or as homework, two to three times a week. For example, I asked them to discuss a protest movement that social media figured predominately in, like Occupy Wall Street. Another example asked them to analyze a business or organization's social media presence based on the strategies from "A Social Media Primer for Technical Communicators" by Meredith Singleton and Lisa Meloncon (2011). They were also asked to post on their own outside the structured writing prompts two to three times a week. Often these posts responded to current news stories that involved social media.

In keeping with social media writing as shorter units of information and text, students were asked to keep their posts to a certain length. They began with 250 words, and by the end of the semester, they

were responding with less than 150 words. This encouraged them to be concise, while still providing substantial responses that illustrated engagement with the reading or topic of discussion. The brevity of texts also supported their posts as they began using images in responses.

In addition to their text-driven responses, they were asked to respond with a meme or an image (see Figure 1), or a link to another article that related to a class reading or discussion, or that responded to an issue or added to professional discourse. I also occasionally asked them to reblog from another account or respond to a Tumblr post from an account of someone outside the class, such as a writer from their specific industry (see Figure 2). By asking students to specifically post in modes that reflect Tumblr, teachers can, as Santos and Leahy further argue, "engineer such discovery and help students explore forms of writing they may not have considered by periodically asking that some portions of the students' online writing to adhere to certain constraints that we have set" (p. 90). I felt that by directing students to the kinds of communication available to them, they could see how including images or links can be beneficial to their communication. They were then challenged to make thoughtful choices about how to convey information to their audiences in meaningful ways.

A further component to the assignment was that every post, no matter what the mode, was hashtagged. Hashtags were used in two ways:

1. To connect the course conversations through their readings and prompt responses.
2. To enter their professional discourses.

After some discussion of hashtags as a rhetorical strategy, students worked together to choose the course hashtag. For our specific class, they chose #UDENG413. This showed the university they were part of, the department the course was in, and the course number. Then they individually discovered what hashtags were typically used in other Tumblr accounts in their future professional communities or accounts dealing with topics that they were interested in. This gave them the opportunity to see what
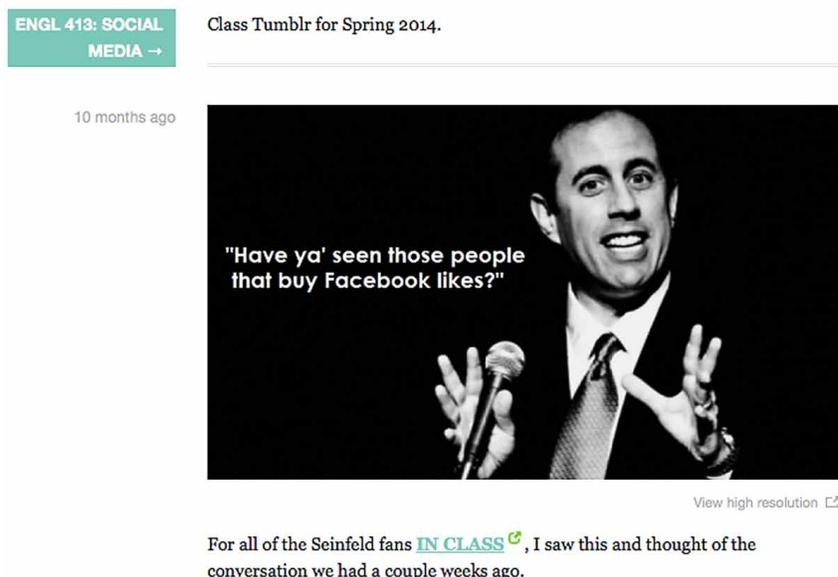
Figure 1. A response with a meme

Figure 2. A reblogged post

language or practices are privileged by certain discourses. It also assisted in their work getting categorized and interconnected with other Tumblr posts on similar topics and becoming a part of a larger network of conversations. This helps students, as Santos and Leahy write, "explore the many kinds of writing available on the web and determining what kinds of writing practices privileged by their online communities are best for expressing their own interests" (p. 88). If a student was interested in the fashion industry or video game design, he or she saw what hashtags are used most often and began to incorporate them into their own posts to connect the professional discourse (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Professional discourse

ENGL 413: SOCIAL MEDIA →

Class Tumblr for Spring 2014.

11 months ago

Cosmopolitan Magazine Mission Statement →

Cosmopolitan: Like #ElleWoods says, we are the "Bible."

Cosmopolitan: We are #FunFearlessFemales.

Cosmopolitan: Fashion, relationships, and health, oh my!

Cosmopolitan: Driving conversations that matter since the 1960s.
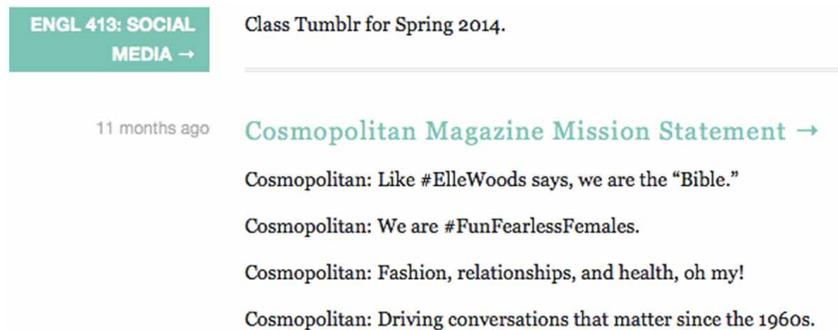
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Ultimately, there were some students who struggled with aspects of the assignment. Many were challenged by the word limit of their responses. Some students were not as successful in finding a professional discourse to take part in. Additionally, some began to rely heavily on posting visuals and had to be reminded to occasionally compose text. And for some, Tumblr was an assignment to complete for a grade, and there was little engagement in the learning. However, for a great deal of students, this was a successful activity that prompted interaction with writing in various ways.

While this assignment began in a more structured format where I assigned the writing prompts, modes of responses, and due dates, students eventually began to write on their own, even when not directed. As the semester progressed and students became more acquainted with Tumblr and developed a writing routine, the posts took on different shapes as students began exploring different modes of writing. They included images, such as memes, with their reading responses (see Figure 4). They also began to respond to each other's posts, as well as posts by users outside the course. The more time they spent writing on Tumblr, the more comfortable they began to feel writing on their own. These unguided posts students composed showcased that they were less intimidated and they felt acknowledged by a larger audience than me alone.

The longer students spent on Tumblr exploring other blogs and crafting their own content, the more their posts began to seem less like traditional writing responses and more like typical Tumblr posts (see Figure 5). Students became encouraged when their class writing began to take the shape of a typical Tumblr blog and would begin to check in with it throughout the day. Occasionally a student would come to class with a story of how someone they did not know liked or reblogged something they had posted. For many students, this was an opportunity to take notice of how they were interacting with a world outside the classroom.

Resistances and Challenges

Because many students are adept at "life writing" and are familiar with social media applications like, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram for personal communication, instructors often assume students can complete these assignments without any guidance or preparation. But writing in these spaces for purposes unlike what they are used to can be difficult for students, especially if writing in general feels

Figure 4. An undirected post

ENGL 413: SOCIAL MEDIA →

Class Tumblr for Spring 2014.

1 year ago(1 note)
#dumbphone butterphone

She's Such a Butterphone (Hardly Working)

Although this is not an article, I thought this was really relevant to our class discussion. As a person who does not have a smart phone, I have found that this sort of judgement has been passed on me. Ten years ago, this phenomenon was not observed. The evolution of the smart phone is just one of the many ways that technology has impacted our culture.

Figure 5. Typical looking Tumblr response

ENGL 413: SOCIAL MEDIA →

Class Tumblr for Spring 2014.

12 months ago(2 notes)

Taco Bell 1979 TV ad

Taco Bell advertisement circa 1979. Their target audience today clearly has not changed since then: guys in the 18-25 y/o range. Social media has only perpetuated this target, using "young" and "hip" lingo on Twitter and staying very relevant on other social medias (Vine, Snapchat). The blonde guy in this ad could easily fit into one of Taco Bell's Vine or Instagram videos today, nearly 35 years later.

(The also looks like me. Weird.)

uncomfortable to them prior to class. This is why there are some challenges for instructors to keep in mind when using social media, specifically Tumblr, in the writing classroom

Many educators make the assumption that students come to the classroom already well equipped to do projects with social media. As Purdy (2010) notes, educators assume that because students use these applications for personal communication outside of class, they should easily be able to jump right into an assignment using social media without much discussion or tutorial (p. 56). Carrying these assumptions into this assignment can alter or limit its effectiveness. Instructors must consider that some students may not easily transition to these new writing situations. Moving the academic writing process from traditional paper to alternative spaces already feels risky, but asking them to write in a space they associate with more personal communication can be paralyzing to some students.

Often, when many of the students were faced with a new writing situation, their anxiety about the new tool often impeded the content of the composition. In the classroom, students expect to write for certain purposes (research essays) and in certain modes (the printed page). When students are asked to write in new ways for academic purposes, they let their fear of failure get in the way. They most likely have composed a message with an image or included a hyperlink in a post to a friend, but that was a different situation, without a grade attached. The complexities of a new space and a larger audience outside the teacher seem risky to them. Even if they are very comfortable using social media for personal reasons, it is often hard for them to transition to using it for academic reasons. Although they may understand that the idea of an audience is much more public in these spaces, students still worry about anyone who is not their teacher seeing their work.

Additionally, some may not be familiar with Tumblr in the same ways they are Facebook or Twitter. Approaching the assignment with the expectation that students can easily move from one social media space to another can also impact the assignment. In fact, according to the Pew Internet Research Center (2015), only 14% of teenagers ages 13-17 use Tumblr, as opposed to Facebook (71%) and Twitter (33%). Further, many students are not as digitally savvy as they are expected to be, and not every student has had access to social media or the technology it is used with. There are still areas of the United States where access to these tools is limited. To many students, Tumblr is a brand new application that some may have difficulties navigating.

When they are asked to write in an unfamiliar space, students often get caught up in the logistics of that space, rather than focusing on the content or how the space can aid in writing. For example, Tumblr, like many social media spaces, occasionally updates its interface, and when students could not find the option needed to post a blog entry or an image in the same place they found it before, they would often panic that they would not be able to complete their assignment. Educators should, as scholars such as Vaidhyanathan (2008) and Thomas (2011) argue, acknowledge the varying levels of technological expertise students bring to the classroom and recognize that there may be some limitations in the learning curve. For these reasons, finding the right means to integrate writing on Tumblr successfully is important to help students feel less anxious about a new writing situation.

DEVELOPING SUCCESSFUL STRATEGIES

In-Class Writing Time

One suggestion to encourage students in this transition is to provide some class time to get acclimated to Tumblr and how it works. In addition to setting up the class Tumblr together, giving students brief

in-class time to write their posts in the first few weeks of the semester can be helpful. This way, if they have questions about how to insert a link or image, or reblog from another site, they have an opportunity to ask the people around them. One option is to have students do a reading for a class and then have the instructor pose a question to respond to on Tumblr as the class period begins. This helps students get used to how the space works for certain modes and to get in the habit of writing regularly, which will improve their overall writing skills. The in-class writing can also be used as a springboard for class discussion. As David Gooblar (2014) states on *The Chronicle Vitae* blog, the in-class writing activity

… lays the groundwork for a good class discussion. Not every student is equally talented at thinking on her feet. By giving your students a chance to think and write about the day's topic, you'll improve your chances of having an interesting and constructive discussion.

In-class writing helps students reflect on the reading and focus for the rest of the class. Additionally, this gives shyer students a chance to participate. If classrooms have a computer and projector in the room, instructors can display the class Tumblr so that it becomes a community activity and students can talk through their responses.

Community Learning

One of the best ways to support student learning as community is to ask students in the class who have used Tumblr to be peer tutors for the space. Inevitably, one or two students have some experience with Tumblr and are willing to help their peers. At the beginning of the assignment, instructors could split the class into small groups, making sure that a Tumblr "expert" is in each one to help with the initial process of joining the site and crafting the first posts. This helps build community in the classroom and enables students to be more resourceful in helping each other. This can help students feel more comfortable with a new writing situation that may seem daunting to them. DeVoss, Johansen, Selfe, and Williams (2003) suggest that by being able to observe their peers and ask questions of them, students will feel more comfortable when they do work on their own (p. 166).

Interacting with peers doing the same projects can help alleviate some of their anxiety. In the first week weeks of this class, students often found new ways Tumblr worked and would come in and share these tips in the first few weeks. For example, one student discovered that to separate multiple hashtags, users must hit return or enter rather than just inserting a space in between each one. The New London Group (1996) call this "Overt Instruction." These types of activities "focus the learner on the important feature of their experience and activities within the community of learners; and that allow the learner to gain explicit information at times when it can most usefully organize and guide practice…" (p. 33). Exploring in a community of learners can help students feel more comfortable writing in an unknown space.

Reflection

A final recommendation would be to have check-in days or points in the semester where students can give feedback on the experiences of writing on Tumblr. Students can write reflective memos to the instructor detailing their experiences writing on Tumblr for class. This was helpful because I was able to gauge the assignment and see where some adjustments can be made. For example, some students noted that they found it hard to remember to post on their own outside of class, so I began including a reminder

with other homework announcements. These reflective assignments also give students some agency in their learning process. When they are given an outlet to share their experiences, they may engage with the assignment more.

Students can also take time to reflect on the experience of writing in their future discourses. They start to understand language choices and issues relevant to their fields. As they step back and look at the choices they made, they will feel more confident knowing that they are capable of writing to these larger audiences. This is a good opportunity to ask them to consider the experience of using a social media space for classroom writing as compared to their personal social media use and to see if there has been any impact or intersection between the two writing situations or if they are more conscious about their rhetorical choices in their personal social media communication.

For example, one of my students mentioned that they started thinking more about proofing their posts in other social media applications because they had gotten in the habit of reading over their posts before the published them on Tumblr. Another student mentioned they were surprised at how many organizations post memes on their Tumblrs and that made her see how social media conventions are for more than personal use. The ability to be critical of the how these spaces promote writing in larger contexts is a valuable tool for students to make decisions about writing on social media for many different purposes.

Taking this knowledge to future writing projects, no matter what mode they are written in, can help them work more efficiently. This helps them feel more comfortable with the composition process. Selber (2004) writes that reflection is "valuable in that the connections between language and practical experience are not always made clear in technological contexts" (p. 205). Yancey (1998) contends that reflecting and asking themselves about the modes they choose to use over other modes help students "to develop as members of a writing public" (p. 311). It gives them a sense of responsibility and helps them see where their choices impact a larger picture.

CONCLUSION

Teaching writing can be challenging. Instructors must not only prepare students for writing in their academic careers, but in their professional and civic lives. In fact, a study done by The National Association of College and Employers (2015), found that 73.4% of employers want candidates with strong written communication skills, so it is more critical than ever that students are prepared to write, research, and think critically in any situation. In addition, instructors must acknowledge the continuously changing landscape of digital communication technology that is prevalent in all areas of lives. Using social media in the writing classroom is no longer just about engaging students as writers, but has become a necessity to equip them to communicate effectively in these social media spaces - especially when, according to the Pew Internet Research Center, as of January 2014, 74% of adult Americans are online and gathering information.

By incorporating social media applications such as Tumblr into the writing classroom, teachers can help students prepare to communicate for academic and professional purposes, as well as to become articulate community members online, where they are living a large part of their lives. As Clark writes, "The public domain is just one facet of the new critical democracy in which our students will be asked to live and work" (p.34). Integrating social media shows students that it is not just a tool for writing, but is also meaningful space to communicate in important ways.

Outlining Tumblr as a writing space demonstrates its value in the writing classroom and that it can be used within the context of other writing courses. With strategic Tumblr use, students are first able to acclimate to the process of writing, rather than focus on the finished product. Second, they are able to understand the larger context of writing and how it benefits them beyond their role as students, and in this particular assignment, how they are preparing themselves for their careers and begin to situate themselves within that context. Tumblr can also be used to explore the many different ways of exploring how people write about a large number of issues and topics in a global context, including both text-based and multimodal writing. Finally, by allowing students to empower themselves by learning the various components and tools of Tumblr and assisting their classmates as well, teachers can give them some agency in their own learning and enable them to find pride and ownership in what they have done.

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ENDNOTE

[1]   Microblogging is posting short online updates.