

Chapter 10

Social Media in an Intercultural Writing Context: Creating Spaces for Student Negotiations

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ABSTRACT

The current research study is part of a larger project that aims to analyze ways in which first year intercultural writing students interpret/understand the impact of social media on their composition practices, critical thinking processes and knowledge negotiations processes. In particular, the current chapter attempts to understand how first year intercultural writing students reflect on and assess the ways social media has helped them practice and or/acquire more critical thinking skills.

INTRODUCTION

The activities that used social media showed me that the subjects in the articles have their examples in real life as well.

We live in a world in which technology is constantly evolving. Technological advances in general and the internet in particular bring people from very different cultures and socio-economic contexts

closer together than ever; in fact, according to Sherry Turkle (1999), “the Internet links millions of people together in new spaces that are changing the way we think. . . , the form of our communities, our very identities” (p. 643). However, technology is only a medium; it provides us with opportunities to engage in communication exchanges, but does not help us acquire the communicative tools and skills needed to engage in global communications and literacies. Another fact about today’s world is that English has become the lingua franca that people from all over the world use to communicate for a variety of purposes with a variety of

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people. Both situations present English language instructors (ESL, EFL, Second Language and composition instructors) with great opportunities; in order for writing instructors to effectively help English language learners, we should encourage them to attain intercultural competence (Byram, 1997) rather than the proficiency level of a native speaker. For that to happen, instructors of English in general and writing instructors in particular need to endlessly reinvent ourselves in the classroom, which, to me, posits a great opportunity or *kairos*.

As much as our society has changed, our student populations and their needs and learning styles have evolved as well. In the past, I have noticed some reticence among some intercultural writers to participate in class, which could indicate that those students failed to understand the value of the knowledge we, as writing instructors, try to help them acquire. Some of students' seeming reluctance may have stemmed from the fact that they could not establish connections between what they learned in the writing classroom and how they learned outside the classroom, which may, in turn, result in students' apparent lack of interest or motivation. In my opinion, this challenge posits another perfect opportunity for writing instructors who should keep building bridges among those perceived disconnects. By designing classroom activities that promote students' active participation in the learning process, writing instructors may be able to aid intercultural writers learn how to communicate in a global world while they consciously decide how to adopt to and adapt new literacies. Furthermore, we should always create activities that encourage students not only to consume but, most importantly, to produce knowledge while using all the technology that has become an integral part of their lives (George, 2002; Trimbur, 2002).

It is my belief that combining sound theoretical and pedagogical practices in the intercultural writing classroom could be beneficial to both instructors and intercultural writers for three main reasons. Firstly, if writing instructors choose course readings on content that is directly related

to our intercultural students' context and interests, they would be familiar with those topics, which could grant a higher participation rate. Secondly, writing instructors should create activities that use various types of social media because that would effectively incorporate and recognize how our students learn and write outside the classroom. Finally, writing instructor should involve their students in classroom assessment activities in which we invite our students to engage in dialogue with us in terms of what is working for them and what could be improved in the class. If writing instructors incorporate those activities in our classrooms, our students' transition into the new academic context and expectations, the writing classroom, may not necessarily be only about compliance but about resistance and negotiation.

This chapter is based on a survey that asked students to reflect on general aspects of their basic writing class (what they had learned so far, what they still needed to work on, and so on), and on specific content-based activities (how activities that used social media helped them with critical thinking, critical writing and knowledge negotiations). In particular, this chapter will report on students' answers to question three in the survey: "How have activities that used social media (YouTube videos, web sites, advertisements, etc.) helped you improve your critical thinking skills?" Many writing instructors and theorists agree upon the fact that technology can help students in the classroom as long as it is used in meaningful ways; furthermore, according to danah boyd (2009), "Educators have a critical role when it comes to helping youth navigate social media. You can help them understand how to make sense of what they're seeing... [T]hey need to understand the structures around them." In an attempt to help intercultural writing students to critically understand and use social media spaces, this chapter will code and analyze my students' answers as they reflected on whether and how class activities that integrate social media had helped them practice and improve their critical thinking skills.

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