

Chapter 6

Incorporating Students' Digital Identities in Analog Spaces: The Educator's Conundrum

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ABSTRACT

Multiliteracies has gained significant favor in the past two decades due to the increased popularity of technology. Educators are not only finding new and exciting ways to make content relatable to students by including their digital lives in the classroom, but now the digital experience of teens is the topic of classroom conversations. The inclusion of students' online identities has certain advantages, as many students may find the bridge between academic work and their out-of-school lives advantageous to their learning. However, educators need to give careful consideration of how to safely include students' digital identities into the classroom, as these online lives are often carefully crafted for their networking platforms and are not necessarily intended for analog, classroom spaces. Throughout this article, the author explores the ways in which teachers incorporate teens' online identities and troubles the notion that teachers can safely include these identities without co-opting their out-of-school online practices.

INTRODUCTION

The following chapter will recognize literature both for and against multiliteracies, specifically related to social media, with the purpose of identifying trends and troubling notions of including online identities in the classroom. The chapter's author, a middle school English language arts teacher, fell prey to the enticing inclusion of social media without considering the potential consequences of incorporating them within a school setting. Although it may be too late to right his wrongs as a classroom teacher, the author hopes that this chapter will give pause to teachers before using social media to draw connections between course content and the personal lives of students.

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IDENTITY CRISIS

Adults like to believe that they can lead pluralistic lives where they simultaneously exist online and offline. We claim to be able to multitask by emailing our boss on weekends or responding to a text message from our significant other while in an important meeting. These are ways that we try to co-exist in different spaces all at once. However, adults often see these as sacrifices that we have to make in our technological world; it is the shrapnel of the digital explosion in our lives. Most of us watched as the technology boom evolved and worked its way into our lives. We adopted those tools that made our lives better/easier and eschewed those we believed we would not need. Most adolescents today are born into a technological world and are led to believe that they need *everything*: the newest and most up-to-date phone, all of the apps that their friends have, a computer that allows them to video chat/play games/edit video, blog, etc. They have not known a life before technology. To them, technology is not just what they do. It is who they are. This pluralistic existence that many adolescents attempt to live is bound to have some consequences.

Research has shown that students have a lot to balance when it comes to differing expectations from their families, friends, and teachers. Phelan, Davidson, and Yu (1998) concluded that students had to develop different types of adaptation strategies in order to bridge their lives between home and school, classroom to classroom, and even from peer to peer. While Phelan et al. (1998) focused primarily on the role of race in these “multiple worlds,” this concept can be useful in understanding some of the issues that students experience in different digital and analog spaces. The transition from each world is not often as seamless as one might imagine. Although the distinction should seem simple, online identities do not cease to exist when the screen turns black.

Media theorist Douglas Rushkoff explained that the rise in the number of teen suicides during the digital age is not due to the fact that technology is inherently depressing so much as “because we are living multiple roles simultaneously without the time and cues we normally get to move from one to the other” (Rushkoff, 2013, p. 126). Dissociative identity disorder, previously more commonly known as multiple personality disorder, is a condition in which a person may suffer from having two more discrete identities that manifest in different ways (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). A diagnosis like this is considered to be aberrant psychological behavior and potentially debilitating if not treated with therapy and/or medication. However, the dawn of social media ushered in an era in which we were able to create new personas for different spaces. Adolescents’ inability to shift gears between their online worlds and reality contributes to a sense of *digiphrenia*, which is an “uneasiness that results from the realization that there is more than one version of ourselves existing in online networks and the real world” (Rushkoff, 2013, p. 75). This fear leads many to be glued to their phones knowing that every moment they are not online is a time where their digital lives could be invited to an online hangout and they will be left out of the loop.

THE ONLINE IDENTITY

In the same way that many teachers, like most professionals, portray different identities online than they do in front of their colleagues and students, young people are careful to separate their lives at home and online from the ones that they present at school. Even with the increase in cyberbullying, many young people feel more comfortable with the digital identities they have created as they seek out like-minded

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