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Digital Divide 2.0: “Generation M” and Online Social Networking Sites in the Composition Classroom

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Abstract

The digital divide has been largely theorized as a problem of access. Compositionists have attempted to move beyond a binary view of technology access in examining the digital divide and in doing so have raised important questions about the larger societal issues connected to issues of technological literacy and access. While much attention has been paid to students at risk of growing up without access to, and experience with, computers, attention also needs to be paid to students’ critical digital literacies. Additionally, we now face a new instantiation of the digital divide where students are often more technologically adept than their instructors. The problem is not so much providing access for Generation M students surrounded by technology but rather to effectively integrate technological literacy instruction into the composition classroom in meaningful ways. Compositionists should focus on incorporating into their pedagogy technologies that students are familiar with but do not think critically about: online social networking sites, podcasts, audio mash-ups, blogs, and wikis. To do so, however, instructors first need to familiarize themselves with these technologies. In essence, compositionists must catch up with the Generation M students who have left them behind.

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1. Introduction

The digital divide has been largely theorized as a problem of access, what [Charles Moran \(1999\)](#) called “the forbidden ‘A’ word of composition studies” (p. 205). National literacy campaigns such as the Clinton Administration’s Technology Literacy Challenge (1996) and the Bush Administration’s No Child Left Behind Act (2001) framed the digital divide within the binary of access. The Technology Literacy Challenge asserted that “every single child must have access to a computer. . . so that every person will have the opportunity to make use of his or her own life” (“[Getting America’s Students Ready](#)”). President Bush extended this call in his controversial No Child Left Behind Act, which offers “a commitment to support teachers, parents, and decision makers in. . . ensur[ing] every child receives the best possible

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education” (“National Education Technology Plan”). Implied is the belief that students without technological access will be prevented from living full, rich lives—that such access will serve students by preparing them for immersion into a capitalistic society. Such a stance is also largely instrumental, assuming that material access and knowledge of tools is all that is needed to assuage the divide between the technological “haves” and “have-nots.”

Compositionists have attempted to move beyond these instrumental views of technology in examining the digital divide and in doing so have raised important questions about the larger societal issues connected to the issues of technological literacy and access. Cynthia L. Selfe’s (1999b) work has been influential in urging us to “pay attention” to technology and technological literacy to understand “how literacy and literacy instruction directly and continually affects. . . the individuals and families with whom we come into contact as teachers” (p. xix). Jeffrey T. Grabill (2003) looked historically at computers and composition research in part to answer Moran’s call for more substantial research focusing on the relationship between access and class. While Grabill noted that from 2000 to 2002 access to computers increased among all user groups, he contended that other critical gaps remain problematic even in the face of increasing access. These critical gaps include knowing how to use technologies, knowing how to understand and use the substantial amounts of information available in our culture, and knowing how to be productive using technologies. This digital divide is more difficult to assess than the material conditions of access. Cynthia L. Selfe and Gail E. Hawisher (2004) continued to develop the call to pay attention to technology in *Literate Lives in the Information Age*, arguing that instructors and institutions in the late age of print need to rise to the challenge presented by students’ increased participation in online spaces.

While much attention has been paid to students at risk of growing up without access to, and experience with, computers, attention also needs to be paid to students’ critical digital literacies (Gurak, 2001; Kress, 2003; Selfe, 1999a; Wysocki & Johnson-Eilola, 1999). Additionally, we now face a new instantiation of the digital divide—call it Digital Divide 2.0—where students are often more technologically adept than their instructors. The problem is not so much providing access for students surrounded by technology but rather effectively integrating technological literacy instruction into the composition classroom in meaningful ways. The media-savvy, multitasking students now in our writing classrooms belong to a group called “Generation M” (Roberts & Foehr, 2005, p. 39). Equally at ease handling multiple instant messaging conversations as they are downloading ringtones to their Razrs and forwarding viral videos, these students possess technological know-how and access to computers but lack critical technological literacy skills. Compositionists should focus on incorporating into their pedagogy technologies that students are familiar with but do not think critically about: online social networking sites, podcasts, audio mash-ups, blogs, and wikis. To do so, however, instructors first need to familiarize themselves with these technologies. In essence, compositionists must catch up with the Generation M students who have left them behind.

One increasingly popular space where Generation M students are practicing textured literacy (Yancey, 2004) and composing digital writing is in online social networking sites. As Web 2.0 technologies, online social networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook offer individuals the chance to create multimodal compositions to express themselves; they can use text, images, sound, and hypertext links to compose individual collages in their social networking personal profiles. Effectively connecting this kind of multimedia composing with technological literacy

issues like those Hawisher and Selfe have long called composition instructors to attend to is a complex task. This complex task, however, is one that we will continue to face in coming years to avoid becoming, as Kathleen Blake Yancey (2004) suggested, anachronistic in our approaches to teaching digital writing (p. 302). Following Yancey's contention that the majority of student writing is happening online without our influence or instruction, the members of the WIDE Research Center Collective concluded that writing instructors must teach digital writing because virtually all writing today takes place in computer-mediated spaces. Today's writing "pushes on institutions in ways that writing has not before pushed" (Hart-Davidson, Cushman, Grabill, DeVoss, & Porter, 2005).

Indeed, online social networking sites represent a challenge to composition instructors in large part because of their complexity—their intense media-rich environments—as well as the sites' popularity among college students. Early social networking sites like (<Classmates.com>) and (<SixDegrees.com>) offered few features beyond the ability to search for and connect to other individuals. Later iterations of social networking sites (including <MySpace.com>, <Facebook.com>, and <Friendster.com>, among others) began to offer more features to attract and retain users, becoming spaces for what Henry Jenkins (2006) has termed "media convergence": that is, spaces where multiple media intersect, collide, and interact in unpredictable ways (pp. 259–260). Certainly there is convergence evident in the multiple media offered in online social networking sites, such as streaming audio and video, blogging software, taggable photos, and other user-defined and manipulable content. But what is more important about social networking sites' place in a convergence culture is the ways they can encourage user participation (which can be envisioned in many different ways). While an historical examination of social networking sites offers an intriguing look at how these online technologies have shifted from static Web 1.0 spaces to dynamic Web 2.0 sites that rely heavily on media convergence, Jenkins pointed out that this is not the most important aspect for us to examine. Rather, the promise and peril of media convergence, and of online social networking sites in particular, is their place within a participatory culture, one in which our students are already actively taking part (Jenkins, 2006).

This article, then, attempts to describe some of the pedagogical implications of paying attention to Generation M's use of online social networking sites, sites that are among the more popular spaces that rely heavily on media convergence. I first define Generation M students as a group. Next, I analyze various definitions of technological literacy to frame my argument that we must begin paying attention as academics to MySpace and Facebook. Finally, I discuss the deepening divide between Generation M students and composition instructors. I argue that composition instructors must continue to attend to the radical changes in writing and writing instruction wrought by networked computers. Again, the majority of Generation M students are already engaged in production activities in online social networking sites, and if we hope to assist students in significant ways with their writings, we must engage in their production methods (Hart-Davidson et al., 2005). Even those students who choose not to participate in online social networking sites are aware of the profound implications they hold for our ways of communicating and socializing. The time has come, then, for us to pay attention to online social networking sites so that we can effectively teach technological literacy in the writing classroom and attend to the deepening digital divide between Generation M students and their instructors.

2. Defining Generation M

Who are the students who make up the collective group often referred to in the media as Generation M, also known as Generation Media, Generation MySpace, or the Millennials? These individuals, born between the early 1980s and late 1990s, are fascinated by and often highly comfortable with technology. Generation M students do not view computers as disconnected from their day-to-day activities but rather as an assumed part of their everyday lives (Oblinger, 2003). More importantly, they live in a world where the lines between consumption and creation are blurring, a world where file sharing and cut-and-paste plagiarism are the norm (DeVoss & Porter, 2006; DeVoss & Rosati, 2002; Moore Howard, 2007; Oblinger, 2003; Ritter, 2005). Our growing concern regarding the ease of web-assisted plagiarism and the ethics of using detection services such as (<Turnitin.com>) is just one way in which the shift to this new world affects us as educators. Of course, we must also consider how to effectively incorporate students' increasing fluencies with the digital media into the writing classroom, and understanding some of the media habits of Generation M students is a necessary step in doing so.

The Kaiser Family Foundation's study of the media consumption habits of individuals between the ages of eight and eighteen provides perhaps the clearest picture of Generation M's media activities. On average, these students spend a quarter of every day interacting with various technologies; the majority of these individuals live in not just media-rich households, but media-saturated households. Of the over two thousand students surveyed, almost every one had access to the Internet and at least one TV set, VCR, radio, CD player, and video game console (Roberts & Foehr, 2005). Though physical and material access to technology is, as Grabill, Hawisher, and Selfe have suggested, still a race- and class-based issue, even students in lower socioeconomic brackets or in minority homes have greater access to technology than just a decade prior. In fact, because of the greater access to technology many of today's students enjoy, Generation M individuals are likely to multi-task, using multiple technologies at once. Generation M students' comfort with technology does not imply, however, that they can understand and critique technology's societal effects. For them, technology is a means to an end; with it, they can find information rapidly and move on to tackle their next hurdle. In the next section, I outline the results of the Educational Testing Service's preliminary survey of information and communication literacy skills to further highlight the disconnect between Generation M students' technological abilities and literacies.

3. Toward a Definition of Technological Literacy

In his 1997 address at the Conference on College Composition and Communication, Lester Faigley looked to the future: "If we come back to our annual convention a decade from now and find that the essay is no longer on center stage, it will not mean the end of our discipline" (p. 40). If the academic essay is no longer the main focus of the composition classroom, then what is? "I expect that we will be teaching an increasingly fluid, multi-media literacy," Faigley portended (p. 41). Ten years later, Faigley is in many respects correct. In the past decade, we have seen an increased focus on information literacies. Yet as a field, we are still wrestling with defining terms like information literacy and technological literacy. In this section, I

showcase the Association of College and Research Libraries' (ACRL) Information Literacy Competency Standards and the Educational Testing Service's Information and Communication Technology test as examples of functional information literacy assessments. Next, I complicate the functional literacy offered by the ACRL and ETS by introducing [Selfe and Hawisher's](#) notion of *literacies of technology* (2004). Finally, I argue that incorporating online social networking sites into the writing classroom can assist composition instructors in attending to technological literacy in ways that can help alleviate what I have termed Digital Divide 2.0.

3.1. Information Literacy

In 2000, the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) defined information literacy as “a set of abilities requiring individuals to ‘recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information’” (p. 2). But while the ACRL rightfully posited that students face an information overload in their daily lives and that they need to be taught how to navigate it in meaningful ways, the focus of the ACRL competencies is still strongly grounded in the genre of the written essay. For example, one performance indicator, “defines and articulates the need for information,” included the following student outcomes:

- Confers with instructors and participates in class discussions, peer workgroups, and electronic discussions to identify a research topic, or other information need
- Develops a thesis statement and formulates questions based on the information need
- Explores general information sources to increase familiarity with the topic
- Defines or modifies the information need to achieve a manageable focus
- Identifies key concepts and terms that describe the information need
- Recognizes that existing information can be combined with original thought, experimentation, and/or analysis to produce new information (ACRL, 2000, p. 8)

In this section, the focus of the ACRL outcomes rests on finding a topic, developing a thesis statement, a focus, and keywords, and producing new information by building on previously published work. These outcomes easily translate into the benchmarks of the writing process familiar to students working on researched essays in a composition classroom. But as Faigley earlier posited, if the essay should no longer be the central goal of the composition classroom, then these standards do not address the full spectrum of information literacies students should possess in an information-rich age.

Drawing on the ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standards report, the Educational Testing Service (ETS) developed a large-scale study in 2005 to assess students' information literacy skills, the ICT Literacy Assessment Test. In 2006, ETS released a report detailing the preliminary findings from a study of over 6,300 students who took the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Literacy Assessment Test.¹ The test, designed to assess seven “skill areas,” measured students' abilities to define, access, evaluate, manage, integrate, create, and communicate information through real-time, scenario-based tasks: searching through

¹ Students who took the test included high school seniors, community college students, and students enrolled in four-year colleges and universities.

databases for information, sorting emails into appropriate folders, comparing and contrasting information from web pages in a spreadsheet, determining the relevance of postings on a web discussion board, and so on. ETS found that few students displayed key information literacy skills and that test-takers were unable to show mastery of higher-order rhetorical skills (ETS, 2006). However, both the ACRL standards and the ICT test rely on limited and incomplete understandings of technological literacy. Instead, I want to complicate their definitions of information literacy by offering one founded on Selfe and Hawisher's (2004) critical analyses of technology: that is, a definition of technological literacy.

3.2. *Technological Literacy*

For the purposes of this article, I draw on Selfe and Hawisher's understandings of literacy in *Literate Lives in the Information Age*. Rejecting technological literacy as the basic acquisition of skills like those presented in the ACRL standards or the ETS' ICT test, Selfe and Hawisher instead traced the concept of technological literacy through case studies of individuals who grew proficient with the technology during the past twenty-five years. They proposed the term "literacies of technology" (or, alternatively, technological literacy) as a phrase that can "connect social practices, people, technology, values, and literate activity, which, in turn, are embedded in a larger cultural ecology" (2004, p. 2). Selfe (1999a, 1999b) pointed out in *Technology and Literacy in the Twenty-First Century* that this kind of technological literacy has two levels: one activities-based and one that operates at the level of literacy practices (pp. 11–12). At the level of literacy activities or events, technological literacy refers to "events that involve reading, writing, and communicating within computer-based environments," such as researching, organizing, and using technological tools (Selfe, 1999a, 1999b, pp. 11–12); these are the sorts of skills that the ETS ICT test measures.

At a level the ETS test does not measure, however, are literacy practices: understanding the complex sets of cultural beliefs and values that influence our understandings of what it means to read, write, and communicate with computers (Selfe, 1999a, 1999b). Both levels of technological literacy are important and need not be mutually exclusive. Students need instruction that will help them gain an awareness of technological literacy practices as well as help them become adept at researching and using technological tools (Selber, 2004). How then can composition instructors work toward this goal? Incorporating online social networking sites like MySpace and Facebook into the writing classroom is one such possibility to help students in the acquisition of technological literacies.

4. Using Online Social Networking Sites to Teach Technological Literacy

We are increasingly asking students to assess, evaluate, and create multimedia texts in composition classes. This shift supports Faigley's assertion that the academic essay would someday retreat as the focus of the writing classroom. Many of these multimedia texts call into question notions of intellectual property and copyright: audio mash-ups of different songs, video remixes, even web sites that borrow code and images from other online sites. Because the shift from print to online writing has accordingly changed the meaning of ownership and authorship, compositionists should bring digital intellectual property issues and, by extension,

technological literacy into the writing classroom. Online social networking sites like MySpace and Facebook are well-positioned within larger fundamental issues concerning copyright and the nature of authorship. Easily accessible to most undergraduate students, these sites have been repeatedly discussed in the media; as well, most students either belong to or know someone who belongs to these sites. Students can quickly make the shift from talking about their experiences in online social networking sites to larger social issues. Because Web 2.0 technologies rely on the basis of user-generated content, they receive staggering amounts of new material at little cost to the sites' creators—think YouTube and its homemade videos and content ripped from television or DVD, Flickr's millions of tagged photos, and the 1.6 million plus user-created and edited Wikipedia entries. All of these sites are currently imbricated in controversies about intellectual property and ownership of the materials included within. Certainly MySpace and Facebook both have histories of brand ownership, media hype, and advertising ripe for student analysis.

Similarly, online social networking sites can provide examples of music-related tensions related to intellectual property that can be showcased in the composition classroom. For example, MySpace user and folk musician Billy Bragg coerced MySpace to change its terms and conditions in early 2006. Bragg removed his music, but not his account, from MySpace in May 2006 after complaining that the terms and conditions implied that the site had a nonexclusive, fully paid, and royalty-free world-wide license to any songs uploaded to MySpace. A month later, in the wake of Bragg's protest movement, MySpace changed its terms and conditions to specifically reassure users that they, not the site, continued to own the rights to their materials.² Bragg's situation brings up an important question central to the debate regarding intellectual property ownership in online social networking sites: Who owns the music?

The demand that users waive all moral rights to their material in order to join a service brings into question the role of social networking sites. Will they usher in a revolution in the music industry by allowing self-promoted artists to circumvent the major record companies who have stood as gatekeepers of public taste for so long? Or will they simply be the means by which the industry keeps its monopoly on copyright ownership and earnings through the silent harvesting of intellectual property rights? (Bragg, 2006, n.p.)

Most students are familiar with, if not users of, peer-to-peer networking programs, YouTube, and MySpace music downloads. Thus, Bragg's controversial campaign for artists' rights provides an opportunity for students to enter into a conversation regarding digital intellectual property and technological literacy.

A final point of entry (though certainly this list is not exhaustive) for introducing technological literacy into the classroom via intellectual property issues is the growing economy of attention surrounding online social networking sites (Davenport & Beck, 2001). The fundamental change in the way business is transacted, from an economy focused on currency and tangible goods to an economy which focuses on gaining, then keeping, a consumer's attention and interest, means that an individual's attention is more valuable than ever (Davenport & Beck, 2001). Online social networking sites are poised to thrive in an economy of attention;

² Ironically, Bragg later admitted in an interview that he had not actually read the terms and conditions initially but was notified about them via a concerned friend.

advertisements and viral videos can be passed rapidly from user to user in a site like MySpace and quickly reach an audience of millions. In one of my classes, one of my students, Charles, broached the topic of “Brody Ruckus” as an example of a viral marketing campaign that had caught his attention. This controversial ad campaign on Facebook began as a ruse to help “Brody,” a Georgia Tech student, get his girlfriend to agree to a *ménage à trois* with another woman. Before Charles realized “Brody” was simply a marketing ploy by the Ruckus Music Network to promote its service to undergraduates, he joined the infamous Facebook group: “I’m lucky number 293,000. . . and it was all for Ruckus music.” Although disappointed, he admitted it “was a good ploy.” Examples like the “Brody Ruckus” Facebook group and Chase’s “Chase +1” credit card campaign (students receive points for purchases on the Chase +1 card that can then be shared with Facebook friends or donated to charity) can be used in the classroom to interrogate how Web 2.0 is now shifting to an economy of attention that advertisers exploit.

Generation M students have grown up in a world filled not only with seemingly endless technological advances but also a seemingly endless glut of advertisements directed at them. Thus, these students are already aware of the advertising potential of online social networking sites and can easily shift to thinking about these issues more critically. One twenty-two-year-old college senior, Ernie, described himself in an interview as “very protective of his personal data and his unique tastes.” After Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation acquired MySpace in July 2006, Ernie removed his profile from the site: “I had a MySpace account but once I found out they were bought up by News Corp, that same day I took off my profile, which was like two months later. . . I don’t want to be a social whore. . . I think they’re using it for data mining” (Ernie, Interview 1, October 2006). Charles, a nineteen-year-old first-year college student, quickly drew parallels between Google and its reliance on ad-supported web searching and the constant spam messages he received in MySpace and Facebook:

With my MySpace I’m getting ten messages every day from people that I know are not my friends and I don’t really want to know me that way. . . I go, “Okay, I got a new event invite. Okay, is a birthday party coming up? No, it’s to see someone’s [pay-to-view Web] camera.” It’s like Google, you know. Google, they do so much advertising, but you’ll never see the ads. Because those are so subtle, they’ll actually turn them into search results so you think it’s the most relevant search. . . And then if you click on [the result] then they have to pay the company. Which is worse: do you want it to be right up in your face or do you want it to be more subtle?

Unlike Ernie, Charles continued to participate in MySpace despite the constant barrage of advertising in the site. Charles felt a vague disquiet at the thought of the site being a centralized vehicle for commercialism but saw no reason to leave the site altogether; instead, he tolerated advertising the same way he did spam: deleting and ignoring it.

5. Paying Attention to Social Networking

Clearly there are multiple entry points for bringing online social networking sites into the classroom to help students think about larger societal issues regarding intellectual property, attribution, and marketing. Despite their continued popularity among undergraduates and their potential pedagogical benefits, online social networking sites are only now being seriously con-

templated for inclusion in academia. Though we have increasingly attempted to pay attention to the integration of technology and literacy and many instructors feel increasing pressure to incorporate technology into their pedagogy, the field of rhetoric and composition has not yet given online social networking sites sustained academic attention. In the fall of 2006, I conducted a nationwide survey of composition instructors and undergraduate students to examine more closely what I have termed the Digital Divide 2.0. In this section, I briefly discuss my methodology and then report on the results of the survey and follow-up interviews.

The survey was designed to evaluate two distinct user groups: composition instructors at the college and university levels and undergraduate students who had taken at least one writing or writing-intensive course in the recent past. Overall, 127 instructors and 354 students responded to the online survey. I asked participants to respond to a series of questions in the online survey that asked them about their experiences using, or choosing not to use, MySpace and Facebook. After the results were collected and the survey closed, I performed follow-up interviews with selected respondents to continue the conversation about online social networking sites. The ten students and ten instructors I spoke to participated in two one-hour, face-to-face interviews that were later transcribed and coded thematically using the software package *NVIVO*.

Overwhelmingly, the results pointed to a divide between students and instructors with regard to online social networking sites. The majority of students surveyed could be associated with the group known as Generation M: eighteen to twenty-four years old and first-time college students. A full quarter (25%) of the student respondents were eighteen years old; of the 354 student respondents 268, or 77%, fell between eighteen and twenty-four years of age. Almost all of these Generation M students used online social networking sites regularly. Sixty-five percent of the undergraduates had MySpace accounts and 61% had Facebook accounts, while nearly half (43%) of the 354 students surveyed had both MySpace and Facebook accounts. These students logged in repeatedly during the course of an average day; most (62%) logged in to MySpace or Facebook at least once per day if not more. Many students spoke of how establishing an online social networking account, particularly a Facebook account, acted as a rite of passage for college students. They described how it was almost assumed that upon graduating from high school a student would abandon his or her MySpace account (which many college students viewed as an “immature” site) and establish a Facebook account to begin communicating with fellow classmates. These Generation M students used online social networking sites in multiple ways: to share class notes and ask questions about homework; to find old friends and make new ones; to keep tabs on significant others; to track the latest trends in music, movies, and viral videos. The majority of Generation M students have embraced online social networking sites, and even those students who chose not to participate in these sites acknowledged the profound influence of MySpace and Facebook on college students’ lives.

In contrast, the majority of the instructors surveyed did not identify as participants in online social networking sites. Of the 127 college-level writing instructors who responded, 60% did not use MySpace and 74% did not use Facebook.³ However, most respondents were familiar with the sites themselves; only three instructors (4%) said they “didn’t know what MySpace is,”

³ Fifty percent of the instructors surveyed selected “graduate teaching assistant” to describe themselves. The remaining respondents identified as adjuncts (21%), assistant professors (15%), associate professors (5%), full professors (2%), and “other” (7%).

while twenty-two instructors (23%) said the same for Facebook. The prevalence of cautionary news reports on social networking, and on MySpace in particular, has helped raise awareness of these sites. Again, while the instructors surveyed were aware of online social networking sites, most chose not to participate in them. The reasons for instructors' nonparticipation in online social networking sites tended to center on three issues: privacy and surveillance, teacher identity, and time. Many instructors cited concerns about their online privacy, Web presence, adware, spyware, or spam as their main reasons for nonparticipation. Others noted concerns because of their occupation as a teacher: "It's a student space, and I want to respect that," stated one respondent.

For the most part, students did not expect that instructors would encroach on online "student spaces" anyway. "I wouldn't expect a teacher to actually use [these] sites," said Chrissa, an eighteen-year-old first-year college student who said that if her teachers, employers, or her parents started using online social networking sites, she "would [use] more privacy settings" to protect her profile from these individuals (Chrissa, Interview 1, October 2006).⁴ Isolde, an eighteen-year-old theater student, felt her instructors were frightened of online social networking: "It kind of scares my teachers because they're not very technologically advanced. My stage manager teacher is a very formidable woman. I'm terrified of her. I couldn't imagine her having Facebook or whatever" (Isolde, Interview 1, October 2006). Eighteen-year-old first-year student Bruce encapsulated Generation M's view of interactions between students and instructors as "one-upmanship":

Almost always older people aren't tech-savvy enough or they haven't heard of it. They wouldn't think to look for their own children because they're little saints and would never do anything wrong and I don't know. It seems like the kids assume that their parents are totally oblivious and their employers are totally oblivious and they have. . . [the kids] are one up on everybody. (Bruce, Interview 1, October 2006)

While Generation M students' perception of their instructors as hopelessly behind in terms of technological knowledge and prowess is somewhat stereotypical, there is a nugget of truth in this stance. Even within the field of composition, many instructors resist what they see as the pervasive encroachment of technology, particularly computers, into pedagogy. Such instructors view technology's role in the classroom as reductive, skills-based, and instrumental. Other instructors are reluctant to participate in various technologies because of the time necessary to commit to them.

Listening carefully to these instructors' feelings of apprehension is important. If technological literacy is an aspect of the writing classroom that we cannot afford to ignore, then we should pay careful attention to rhetoric and composition instructors who fail to pay attention to the ways technologies influence our students' literacy practices. I do not want to suggest that all compositionists must embrace online social networking sites wholeheartedly; participation in these sites is not essential to be able to attend to ongoing cultural conversations regarding online social networking or media convergence. However, the dearth of academic attention to online social networking sites in the field of rhetoric and composition is worrisome, particularly as such sites have existed since the 1990s. The majority of instructors I spoke with

⁴ All respondents' names are pseudonymous.

described participation in online social networking sites as appropriate for students but not for themselves, further reinforcing the participation gap Jenkins (2006) described as resulting in groups that “feel more confidence in engaging with new technologies” than others (p. 258). In this instance, however, it is the instructors who lack the confidence to participate in social networking sites, while students widely participate and freely engage in the various media offered via these sites.

Perhaps even more interesting is the ability of online social networking sites to topple traditional classroom hierarchies of power in unpredictable ways. While such spaces certainly offer varied ways for participants to broaden their literacy skills through their involvement in media-rich environments, social networking sites also pose a potential threat to the established order of things in academia, particularly the classroom. If we are standing at a moment of possibility wherein the old rules are open to change and relationships are forced into negotiation, then online social networking sites may be one of the major forces in a convergence culture that force us to look at the deepening divide between students and instructors—not only in terms of the skills and abilities that preclude a digital divide but also the participatory democracy encapsulated in each classroom.

Previous computers and composition research focusing on panopticism in the writing classroom highlighted the ways technology afforded the instructor control of the classroom, particularly in his or her ability to surveil the classroom (Davis & Hardy, 2003; Janangelo, 1991; Taylor, 1998; Zuboff, 1988). Online social networking sites showcase an intriguing turn of events wherein students’ scrutiny of their instructors inverts traditional notions of classroom surveillance. Because of their greater presence in, and familiarity with, these sites, students are able to surveil their instructors while remaining off the radar themselves. Overall, those instructors who did participate in social networking sites like MySpace and Facebook did so with a healthy dose of suspicion; many remained apprehensive of surveillance by students or authority figures. Instructors often felt burdened with the responsibility “as instructors” to ensure their immunity to surveillance in these sites: “As instructors, I think we have to realize what our students could be seeing about us . . . and if we want them to see that. If we don’t, we can choose to not put it up or lock our profiles with privacy settings.” Many characterized students as likely to engage in surveillance of their teachers: “I understand students’ curiosity, and think they are probably more likely to engage in [surveillance] than instructors are.” Another instructor seemed resigned to the inevitability of students monitoring instructors’ profiles: “[It’s] not their business; however, we know they will do it anyhow.” Such responses portray social networking sites as battlefields where students are pitted against instructors, with the instructors often placed in the losing position. As well, they underscore the seeming helplessness many instructors feel regarding control in online social networking sites, spaces where they already do not feel as though they belong.

These instances showcase how traditional classroom power differentials easily break down in convergent spaces that allow for and encourage individual participation. Many individuals have been penalized for their part in using social networking sites to rupture the stable relations established between instructors and their students in academia. Students at Syracuse University who banded together to complain about a teaching assistant were expelled from the course and forced to create materials for the campus community “on the dangers of Facebook” (Capriccioso, 2006, n.p.). An adjunct at Southern Methodist University who lashed out at what

she saw as unfair material conditions on her campus, where students wore fancy clothes and drove expensive cars while temporary instructors scraped by and felt invisible, was eventually fired (Liner, 2006). A Duquesne University student who started an anti-gay Facebook group was punished in the form of a writing assignment (Bugeja, 2006, p. C1). Such ruptures point to the complexities of power relations in academia and should be the cause for us to think about the difficult questions behind them. Unfortunately, in many of these instances those in marginalized positions or those who expressed unpopular opinions about what they saw as the “truth” were further silenced by those in power—the Syracuse students expelled, the adjunct fired, the Duquesne student forced to remove his comments from Facebook.

Concerns regarding surveillance, authority, and boundaries in online social networking sites are significant barriers to encouraging participation in these sites among many academics. But to assist students in strengthening their technological literacy, particularly in online social networking sites, we must first be able to understand and critique these sites ourselves. This includes being aware of the online spaces where students congregate every day—sites like MySpace and Facebook. Ideally, to understand these sites at more than a cursory level, participation is key. If we disregard online social networking sites, we are potentially missing out on a familiar and accessible example of rhetorical analysis that we can harness for our classrooms. We will continue to exacerbate the digital divide that has formed between Generation M students and composition instructors.

Similar fears about the online safety of youth who use social networking sites should be approached with caution. As with any new technology, the ramifications of social networking sites cannot yet fully be realized, but this does not mean that we should support attempts in higher education to force social networking out of the picture. Legislative efforts like the Deleting Online Predators Act, which aims to block minors from many participatory Web 2.0 sites, do little to prepare students for the inevitability of living day-to-day with the increasing influence of such technologies on their lives. Jenkins noted that, “right now, MySpace and the other social network tools are being read as threats to the civic order, as encouraging anti-social behaviors. But we can easily turn this around and see them as the training ground for future citizens and political leaders” (Jenkins & Boyd, 2006, n.p.).

I would further confront this binary and argue that social networking sites are challenging because of their ability to be both threatening to the established order of things and at the same time protective of traditional ways of understanding the world. MySpace and Facebook force instructors to confront and challenge the labels placed on individuals in academia: student, teacher, administrator, and so on. Individuals’ behaviors in these sites may force us to re-envision what it means to be an academic today, what a classroom looks like, or what good writing entails. When we confront challenges to traditional hierarchies of power in social networking sites, we can take these as opportunities to reconsider which voices are allowed to speak with authority in the classroom. Finally, these sites are challenging because many of the traditional literacies upheld in the writing classroom seemingly have no place here. Yet if we look more closely at social networking sites as sites of media convergence where literacy in a more general sense can be practiced, then such sites have much to offer compositionists interested in engaging students in the act of composition—broadly defined. They allow students practice in writing their own content (creating their “about me” pages and composing blogs, for example), appropriating others’ content (uploading images, videos, and music found elsewhere

online), and remixing content (improving on web templates for their profile pages, creating fan fiction, remixing videos). The creation of an online social networking profile is in actuality a complicated exercise in self-representation that requires a great deal of skill in composition, selection, manipulation, and appropriation (Perkel, 2006, p. 9).

Reframing literacy in light of participatory spaces like social networking sites will be key to harnessing the potential of these sites for composition pedagogies appropriate for the 21st century. Selfe and Hawisher (2004) have already argued that educators cannot ignore the increasingly expansive networked environments students use to communicate, lest they run the risk of their curricula no longer holding relevance for those students (p. 233). While rhetoric and composition scholars have made great headway in bringing certain technologies into the classroom—blogs, wikis, course management systems, and word processing all spring to mind—other technologies like computer games, social networking sites, and cell phones have received less academic attention despite their potential pedagogical value. Despite the challenges of using social networking sites in the classroom, they can provide many teachable moments for instructors who wish to talk with students about audience, discourse communities, intellectual property, and the tensions between public and private writing. Sherry Turkle (1995) observed in *Life on the Screen* that “life online does provide new lenses through which to examine current complexities” (p. 232). What I propose is that compositionists begin looking at online social networking sites through an academic lens to examine the complexities these sites showcase and what ramifications they may hold for our pedagogies and our field.

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