Perspective on Textual Production, Student Collaboration, and Social Networking Sites

PROBLEM

The field of composition has long valued collaboration in every part of the writing process; in the invention, composing, and revisions stages (Roskelly, 2000; Howard, 2001). This belief has been espoused in composition classrooms on campuses around the world. Likewise, recent research has shown that collaborative learning can be successful and beneficial to highlighting the never-ending process nature of composition when conducted in virtual spaces using visual media (Price & Warner, 2007). In addition to facilitating active writing processes, at least one study has also proven that the product of collaborative writing done exclusively online can be deemed as effective, if not more so, than the same work done in a traditional frontal meeting (Passig & Schwartz, 2007). Collaborative writing privileges the social nature of textual production and reception in ways that other pedagogical practices may overlook. As recent research displays, the benefits of a collaborative writing process are clearly expanding beyond the traditional composition classroom into virtual and online spaces.

However, students may consider virtual spaces online—such as the popular social networking site *Facebook*—a near sacred space that lies exclusively out of the reach of academic spaces. Even if this is viewed as true, instructors of composition in higher education may not be able to ignore the growing usage of this site and others like it. By summer 2007, *Newsweek* reported that *Facebook* had over 35 million active users, boasted over 100,000 new registrations per day, and watched as users spent an average of 20 minutes on the site per day (Levy, p. 40). By the end of 2007, it is projected that over 10 million users of the site will be current college students (p. 42). Especially as the site opens itself up to members without an education affiliation (email address with a ".edu" suffix), and is transported to laptops via near-ubiquitous WiFi connections on college campuses, the once heavily fortified academic walls are now being confronted by outside and decidedly non-academic users and spaces. The challenge to composition instructors who hold dear process-based and collaborative pedagogy, then, is to bridge student attitudes between this apparent social and spatial divide online and in classrooms.

There is a perceived divide between the types of socialization students engage in online and in classrooms. This is particularly true when addressing the process of creating text as a product of social collaboration. While there is no doubt that the language and goals of the socialization vary, the goal of textual production in social and academic spaces may be closer than currently perceived: in each situation, students desire to be heard and understood. The question then becomes whether or not students perceive the socially-constructed textual production online in the same ways they perceive socially-constructed textual production in academic spaces, as happens when students collaborate on an academic assignment in class. Both situations (or online and in academic spaces) involve socialization through student interaction. Both situations involve textual production through collaboration. Yet students may not realize that the processes are similar in both situations even though the products achieve different goals. If so, instructors are missing out on an opportunity to improve student attitudes toward academic collaboration by not utilizing existing (and popular) technology within a long-established pedagogy.

Because of this perceived divide between social attitudes within strictly defined spaces, students may experience difficulty switching between their personal goal of being heard and their academic goal of pleasing the instructor. While instructors may extend their academic space beyond the classroom by assigning extracurricular work, students' attitudes towards fulfilling the academic goal of acceptable work remains unchanged. Likewise, students may wait to fulfill their personal goals of communication in venues outside of class. As WiFi technology expands on college campuses, and students continue bringing laptops to class, social spaces (via the Internet) are infiltrating traditional academic spaces. The problem then becomes how instructors can invite this social space into classrooms while maintaining an academic integrity and simultaneously encouraging students to utilize these spaces to fulfill personal *and* academic goals. To accomplish this, instructors need to understand the attitudes that may guide their students' collaborative textual production in these expanding mutually inclusive spaces.

PURPOSE

It is the purpose of this study to explore outcomes of the following logic: 1) Students on *Facebook* are producing text and participating in a social community online and outside of class in virtual spaces, 2) In academic spaces, such as classrooms, instructors are asking students to produce text and join an academic community, 3) *Facebook*, and Web 2.0 technology, can be used to show students that they are engaging in similar processes of textual production and collaborative community involvement in two perceived opposing spaces, and 4) By introducing *Facebook* in a classroom, and employing its facilitation through understanding of activity theory, instructors can help students internalize this textual production and collaborative process for future times when such technology may not be present.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Several theoretical frames will support the central view of activity theory (Rex, Steadman, & Graciano, 2007) as a way to use online technology to help students internalize effective collaborative practices. Research from across disciplines has begun exploring ways that activity theory can help researchers understand how Internet-produced texts (ITexts) are based in human activity (Geiser, et al, 2001) Kevin Brooks (2002) asserts that "an activity theory perspective supports the notion that a 'community' provides individuals and groups with essential support for meeting their goals" (p. 350) in justifying his use of hypertext to facilitate collaborative assignments. This idea of "community" then becomes the tool that students can use in reformulating their attitudes towards collaborative textual production. The community of *Facebook* confronts the implied community of scholars in academia. Asked to be part of both communities, students may be able to use their knowledge of *Facebook* to express their burgeoning academic knowledge. Likewise, Rebecca Moore Howard (1995) recognizes "the collective, unfinished text" (p. 791) produced by authors using hypertext in new media realms. This focus on process may be facilitated, and more readily internalized through the use of social networking sites, in an academic space by gauging student attitudes towards completing such a project.

A discussion of place and space is necessary when considering virtual worlds supplementing traditional academic environments. An understanding of space theory provides an insight into not only the "what" of student interactions, but the corresponding "where" and "how" components as well. Scholarship by Keith and Pile (1993) opens the door to such exploration by providing a broader understanding of the term "spatiality" as it applies to the

inherent nature of social and spatial forces juxtaposed when subjects interact within a given situated space (p. 6). When considering using technology in academic spaces, and social sites like *Facebook*, this comprehensive view becomes more important as instructors realize that a social networking site *is* an actual space that users can virtually visit and inhabit in much the same ways users, or students, populate classrooms. By allowing users to continuously relate via text, *Facebook* creates a virtual space that mimics these "real" social settings.

This focus on the social within the spatial, as realized by Keith and Pile, highlights the essential social relationship aspect Henri Lefebvre (1974, trans. 1991) broke ground with by asking, "where does a relationship reside when it is not being actualized in a highly determined situation?" (p. 401). Over three decades before the conception of this study, it is fair to say that he did not foresee the advent of the Internet, where sites literally "wait" to be acted upon and interacted with. A site like *Facebook* exists, but is essentially dormant until users interact with each other and create textual evidence of their interaction. This, again, was forecast by Lefebvre in analyzing a social relationship through space theory in that when looking at these types of (online and virtual) relationships it may be "impossible simply to dub it a *form,* for the form as such is empty, and must have content in order to exist. Nor can it be treated as a *function*, which needs objects if it is to operate. Even a *structure*, whose task it is to organize elementary units within a whole, necessarily calls for both the whole and the component units in question" (p. 401). This foregrounding displays an essential lesson for using social networking sites in academic spaces: by introducing social space to an academic space, instructors create the possibility of a community formed primarily through situated socialization. This spatiality may affect student attitudes towards collaboration and textual production.

Currently the Internet is being populated by Web 2.0 sites that feature user-centric and data-reliant platforms to facilitate interactions in purely visual spaces. These sites take on an interesting character when viewed through the lens of space theory in that effective Web 2.0 sites cater to "the edges and not just the center" of the web (O'Reilly, 2005), meaning that their virtual space is meant to be explored as changing and uncharted territory, not simply major sites that are visited and considered static. By exploring *Facebook*'s occupation within Web 2.0 virtual space alongside elements of activity and space theories, instructors can observe students' processes in completing a collaborative academic composition assignment online in both a social and spatial context. By using *Facebook* as a representative virtual space outside of academia, instructors can observe how students (re)occupy this non-academic space after given the charge of conducting an academic collaborative assignment borne out of the academic space of a composition classroom. This may also allow instructors to explore how a site like this is changing students' views and uses of technology in 21st century academia.

Thinking in terms of virtual space extends beyond commercial and social sites on the Internet, and can provide instructors with new ways of thinking about the social within current academic space. Current online classrooms and classrooms where *Facebook* has directly affected instruction provide evidence of this possibility (Simpson, 2006; Mazer, Murphy, & Simonds, 2007). Likewise, Bruce, Hinn, and Leander (2001) have proven that this extension of space can also add to social understandings of collaboration, as they noted, "new modes of communication, whose effects modify with use, pose new challenges for understanding collaboration. At the same time, technology-based, collaborative learning projects…typically experience continual revision throughout" (p. 161). This increased focus on process through technology and virtual space further enforces the interplay of social and spatial in regards to creation of identity and subjectivity within student writers (Holland & Leander, 2004).

The discussion of space supplements composition's already prefigured understanding of peer collaboration in the writing process. Kenneth A. Bruffee's ur-text on collaboration, "Collaborative Learning and the 'Conversation of Mankind'," (1984) implicitly raises issues of space as it discusses students' needs to enter into a "community of knowledgeable peers" when creating knowledge in the composition classroom. Students already present on *Facebook* represent one such community of peers already existing in a situated space. He writes that instructors "should contrive to ensure that students' conversation about what they read and write is similar in as many ways as possible to the way we would like [students] eventually to read and write" (p. 642). Following earlier discussion, this kind of thinking asks instructors to consider social contexts beyond the classroom walls when asking students to join an academic community, which, more than likely, exists in the situated space of classrooms and campus.

However, simply moving academic conversations into a traditionally nonacademic realm (or the converse: allowing social/nonacademic conversations into classrooms) is not simply done. Kathleen Blake Yancey and Michael Spooner point to this problem in their exploration between the committee and community binary. In their explanation, the space of committees belongs to the world of work, where inhabitants (or students) are set to a task with only mild interest and little emotional attachment. Community work, on the other hand, is a space of willing collaboration and joint exploration (Yancey & Spooner, 1998). It is easy to see how this aligns with the academic and nonacademic divide in relation to using social networking sites like *Facebook* in the classroom to introduce a social community to what may easily be viewed by students as "the world of work" within the classroom. The question, of course, is whether or not students will perceive of these communities as working in tandem or being mutually exclusive to their personal and academic goals. To gauge student attitudes on this synthesis, the following study is proposed.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

As a result of these considerations, my primary questions are: What are students' current attitudes towards social networking sites like *Facebook*? What are student attitudes towards academic collaboration? And, as a result of the previous two questions: Does the perceived social space of a social networking site like *Facebook* affect student attitudes of collaboration in an academic setting?

METHODS/DESIGN/DATA

- I will survey the attitudes of one section of English 125 (n=18) throughout one semester of coursework to gauge their attitudes towards three things: what it means to produce "academic" text, peer collaboration for academic goals, and *Facebook* usage.
- Within the first week of class, I will survey the students with some combination of the following questions:
    - Do you use *Facebook*?
    - How would you categorize your use (e.g. to stay in touch with friends, to meet new people, to do school work, for entertainment, etc.) of *Facebook*?
    - Would you categorize your written texts on *Facebook* (e.g. wall posts, messages, photo tags, etc.) as the same type of text you produce in class (e.g. in-class notes, journal entries, response papers, etc.)?
    - Have you ever collaborated on or coauthored academic work in class?
    - Describe your attitude towards collaboration before the assignment.

    - Describe your attitude towards collaboration after the assignment.
    - Would you feel comfortable using *Facebook* to complete an assignment in class?
    - Do you think academic work produced on *Facebook* would be as high in quality as work produced not using *Facebook*?
- After conducting the survey, I will conduct a traditional composition classroom with individual assignments and frontal collaboration in-class.
- Midway through the semester I will survey the students with some combination of the following questions:
    - How do you define collaboration?
    - Describe your attitude towards collaboration before you completed [some assignment].
    - Describe your attitude towards collaboration after you completed [some assignment].
    - Do you think the academic work produced by this collaborative assignment is as high in quality as work that you could have produced on your own?
    - Did collaborating in a group of peers affect the way you approached this academic assignment?
- For the final collaborative project, I will invite students to form their own groups based on whether they want to use *Facebook* in class to facilitate their collaboration or proceed according to traditional frontal methods.
- For the groups that decide to use traditional and frontal methods, I will provide them with a similar survey to the one described above.
- For the groups that decide to use *Facebook* to collaborate, I will provide them with a survey that asks some combination of the following questions:
    - How do you define collaboration?
    - Describe your attitude towards collaboration before you completed [some assignment].
    - Describe your attitude towards collaboration after you completed [some assignment].
    - Do you think the academic work produced by this collaborative assignment on *Facebook* is as high in quality as work others produced by not using it?
    - How was the collaborative process affected by using *Facebook*?
    - Did using *Facebook* for this assignment affect your definition of collaboration?
    - Did you use *Facebook* exclusively in class? At all outside of class?
    - Would you ever use *Facebook* to collaborate in another class that didn't call for it?

PROJECTED DATA ANALYSIS

After the class is complete I will compile the survey results to gauge student attitudes towards producing "academic" text, collaboration, and *Facebook* usage to see if the class experience has changed attitudes at all. The survey results will be considered independent of student grades or personal consideration of the quality of students' final projects. I am interested in the student attitudes towards the process, not necessarily the quality of the final product.

I am interested in seeing whether or not students currently perceive *Facebook* as a strictly social (and correspondingly, non-academic) space, and whether or not this experience has changed that attitude. This may have implications for instructors trying to "force" academic

discourse into a safely guarded student space. I am also interested in seeing current student perceptions of peer collaboration, and whether or not this experience has changed that attitude. This may have implications for instructors assuming positive student attitudes towards collaboration regardless of the introduction of technology. Finally, I am interested in seeing if allowing *Facebook* to be used for an academic setting changed student attitudes towards textual production and collaboration. This may have implications for instructors who want students to produce academic text and collaborate in an easy manner without the inherent anxiety of producing quality projects.

References

Brooks, K. (2002). Reading, Writing, and Teaching Creative Hypertext: A Genre-Based Pedagogy. *Pedagogy: Critical Approaches to Teaching Literature, Language, Composition, and Culture*. 2(3) 337-356.

Bruffee, K. (1984). Collaborative Learning and the "Conversation of Mankind". *College English,* 46(7), 635-652.

Bruce, B.C., Hinn, D. M., & Leander, K. (2001). Case studies of a virtual school. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 45(2), 156-163.

Geisler, C., et al. (2001). IText: Future Directions for Research on the Relationship between Information Technology and Writing. *Journal of Business and Technical Communication,* 15(3), 269-308.

Holland, D., & Leander, K. (2004). Ethnographic Studies of Positioning and Subjectivity: An Introduction. *Ethos*, 32(2), 127-139.

Howard, R. M. (2001). Collaborative Pedagogy. In G. Tate, et al. (Ed.), *A Guide to Composition Pedagogies* (pp. 54-71). New York: Oxford University Press.

Howard, R. M. (1995). Plagiarisms, Authorships, and the Academic Death Penalty. *College English*, 57(7), 788-806.

Keith, M., & Pile, S. (1993). The politics of place. In Keith, M., & Pile, S. (Eds.), *Place and the Politics of Identity* (pp. 1-21). New York: Routledge.

Lefebvre, H. (1991). *The Production of Space*. (D. Nicholson-Smith, Trans.). Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers. (Original work published 1974)

Levy, S. (2007, August 20). Facebook Grows Up. *Newsweek*, 40-46.

Mazer, J. P., Murphy, R.E., & Simonds, C.J. (2007). I'll See You On "Facebook": The Effects of Computer-Mediated Teacher Self-Disclosure on Student Motivation, Affective Learning, and Classroom Climate. *Communication Education*, 56(1), 1-17.

O'Reilly, T. (2005). What is Web 2.0: Design Patterns and Business Models for the Next Generation of Software. *O'Reilly*. Retrieved November 14, 2007, from http://www.oreillynet.com/pub/a/oreilly/tim/news/2005/09/30/what-is-web-20.html

Passig, D., & Schwartz, G. (2007). Collaborative Writing: Online Versus Frontal. *International Journal on E-Learning,* 6(3), 395-412.

Price, M., & Warner, A.B. (2007). What You See Is (Not) What You Get: Collaborative Composing in Visual Space. *Across the Disciplines at WAC Clearinghouse*. Retrieved November 1, 2007, from http://wac.colostate.edu/atd/visual/price_warner.cfm

Rex, L., Steadman, S., & Graciano, M.K. (2007). Researching the Complexity of Classroom Interaction. *Handbook of Complementary Methods for Research in Education*. (pp. 1-36)

Roskelly, H. (2000). The Risky Business of Group Work. In E. Corbett, et al. (Ed.), *The Writing Teacher's Sourcebook* (4th ed.) (pp. 123-128). New York: Oxford University Press.

Simpson, K.P. (2006). Collaboration and Critical Thinking in Online English Courses. *Teaching English in the two-year college*, 33(4), 421-429.

Yancey, K. B., & Spooner, M. (1998). A Single Good Mind: Collaboration, Cooperation, and the Writing Self. *College Composition and Communication*, 49(1), pp. 45-62.