

THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY
SCHREYER HONORS COLLEGE

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

THE SOCIAL CLASSROOM: EXPLORING HOW SOCIAL MEDIA IS BEING USED
AS A LITERACY TEACHING TOOL IN GRADES K-12

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ABSTRACT

For my honors thesis I will examine various internet-based sources of literature in the hopes of gaining a better understanding of how the growing presence of new media has influenced the development of fiction written for children and young adults. How has the powerful wave of social media changed children's literature? In what ways has the process of creating and consuming literature been altered by the expansion of new media? I will extend upon a project completed for a 400-level rhetoric course and apply traditional characteristics and theories of children's literature to the growing pool of internet resources targeted at educating and developing literacy in school-aged children, such as PBSkids.com and KidsHealth.org, with an ultimate goal of cataloging and analyzing the methods used by organizations to promote literature and literacy in this particular age-group.

According to a 2009 Nielsen Company report, the average American internet user spent 68 hours online per month between home and work. During this time the average 2009 American user would visit 2700 websites and average approximately 57 seconds per site. While these numbers are still significantly lower than the average time spent watching television, the study is further evidence of the incredible amount of information consumed through the constant presence of the internet. The goal of this project is to provide scholars with an in-depth study of one of many ways the development of new media has changed what it means to be literate in the 21st century. While the allure of new media lies in how different it seems from traditional means of promoting and establishing literature, I anticipate finding more similarities than differences as I continue this project. I predict that the most significant change provided by new media is the role of the interactive element it offers to contemporary young readers; the line between producers and consumers of content has never been so blurred, and the ability to communicate directly with both the authors and the other readers could have changed reading into a much less solitary experience.

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And of course, my parents, for inspiring my thesis and cheering me as I worked.

Chapter 1

Reflections

Introduction

As of today, March 17, 2013, it has been exactly one year and ten days since I began [the project that would evolve into my honors thesis](#). I knew at the time that I would continue the project and was working up the nerve to ask my English 474 professor, Dr. Mya Poe, to be my adviser. I knew that I had chosen a topic that would allow me to experiment with new media resources and try to do something a bit different from the standard. The project ended up much more “different” than I anticipated.

It was born of a simple premise: the internet is currently a factor in the way American children read and, rather than argue over how social media can harm the English language and our nation’s youth in the future, academia should invest time in reviewing how social media is being used for the (supposed) benefit of children in the present. I still have the sheet of paper that Dr. Poe and I first sketched an outline for my thesis—I used it to sketch an outline for this reflection. It read as follows:

- An introduction that justifies my project, defines my terms and limits, and introduces the audience to my favorite word, “interactivity”.
- A literature review that summarizes literacy theory and brings attention to the holes I perceived in charting how the internet is currently being used in developing children’s literacy.

- Three or four case studies on different bodies currently using social media for children's literacy.
- A conclusion that encourages readers to answer more questions.

It was to be a 40 page academic paper, an innovative subject in an old format, and I never questioned that I would write an essay. Luckily, my adviser did.

I cannot remember exactly when this conversation took place. I do remember the look on Dr. Poe's face when she said, with a calmness that belied how important the statement would be to my academic career, "Why don't you put your thesis on social media?"

The notion of using multimedia tools on the internet to write a thesis on social media and the internet seems simple in hindsight but, until that recommendation, it had been completely beyond my imagination. Writing a non-traditional thesis never occurred to me—I had not even realized that such things were allowed in the English field, where it is not uncommon for presenters at conferences to forgo PowerPoint in favor of reading a shortened version of their research out loud.

I agreed immediately and promised to email Dr. Poe a list of possible multimedia tools to use for different aspects of my thesis. And now, one year and ten days after my project was born, I am finishing what is (as far as I know) the first Schreyer Honors thesis entirely illustrated on and through social media.

I have no regrets and no intention to rehash my work in essay form. All my research is documented on thesocialclassroom.tumblr.com. This written portion is a reflection on the work I have done and how I learned to do it; a guide that would have been invaluable one year and ten days ago. If any other students intend to undertake a project through social media, there are a few things they should know.

The Disadvantages

I imagine Dr. Poe knew immediately that an online thesis did not necessarily mean a simpler thesis, and I quickly learned that she was right. There are many benefits to writing a nontraditional thesis, but those looking for an “easy” way to a Schreyer Honors medal will be disappointed in the level of discipline it takes to diverge from the path that the college very helpfully lays out for its students. There are several difficult factors of a social media/multimedia thesis that I was forced to adapt to, and they all share a common denominator in the fact that research and internet publishing are two very different monsters.

The first is the utter lack of precedent to learn from. Agreeing to do something innovative is agreeing to wander into uncharted territory. No one I knew had done or was doing work quite like mine—the closest I could find was fellow Liberal Arts Scholar Julia Shrank, who is currently working on a website—and I had no one to turn to for a tested example. I cannot adequately describe the relief I felt when I began to work on this written portion and saw that the Honors College provides a detailed template for its format review. It was the first time all year that someone told me exactly how something related to my thesis should be done. An exhausting majority of my time was spent planning; I had to researching possible multimedia tools, match these tools with the topics they were best suited to represent, learn how to use these tools effectively, draft materials for these tools, and insure that the content would embed onto my blog before I could started to “write” any one piece of my work.

The writing itself was also a learning experience. I struggled with finding a tone that balanced my academic research background with the informality expected in tools like Tumblr, comic-strip creation tools, and animation software. The detailed explanations expected in an

academic paper are unnecessary in social media platforms, which thrive in methodical conciseness. I could not write a 40-page essay and regurgitate it onto Tumblr, Prezi, or Storify. Not only would it be a bizarre and uncomfortable pairing (their distinctions from long essays are what made these platforms so popular) but it would be against everything I meant to represent in my work. My research reviews the innovators; there is nothing innovative about Microsoft Word's copy and paste features.

And finally, there was the matter of publishing the blog itself. The content I created had to be moved onto the blog somehow and, while Tumblr is generally forgiving to those who do not code, I still found myself learning programming languages to bypass simple problems. Eventually I found myself coaxed onto CodeAcademy.com, a website that teaches beginners basic HTML, in order to ease the publishing process. I essentially was forced to acknowledge formatting issues, not unlike those that anyone who writes their research on Microsoft Word must acknowledge, without the benefit of prior experience with the programs or a template to work through. Fixing spacing issues on Microsoft Word is (usually) a matter of opening the Paragraph option after right-clicking the text. Fixing spacing issues on Tumblr involves trying to deduce why those spacing issues occurred in the first place, if they can be changed, and (inevitably) researching the proper code to insert.

Upon reflection, the disadvantages of presenting a thesis online are rooted in an extra "step" to the thesis process. Normally, one performs their research and then writes about it. When writing a thesis through new media, one must perform their research, *learn how to present it properly*, and then begin writing.

The Advantages

Despite the many unanticipated frustrations, the various benefits of constructing a thesis through social media platforms and multimedia tools outweigh the cost.

Writing a thesis through new media adds an important layer of availability to your work: your research is no longer the exclusive intellectual property of yourself, your advisers, and those in your field. By putting your research online you are allowing others—those experienced in your field of research, scholars outside of your field of research, and those who have never read a research article before—to experience and learn from your work. It gives you the opportunity to break through the world of academia, which thrives in exclusivity, and make research readily accessible to those outside of scholarly research who stand to benefit or are greatly affected by what you are studying. Few of the high school students I studied would be willing to sift through the many long scholarly essays that describe them, despite the fact that all of the information collected is meant to somehow benefit them in the long-run. It is bizarre that academia both studies the world and, however unconsciously, bars the majority of the world from understanding those studies. A research project presented well through new media is a research project with a much broader audience than the standard essay; it is offered to everyone with adequate internet access, rather than everyone with a research database account.

The promise your research having widespread availability alone is enough motivation to write a thesis online, but it is not the sole beneficial factor. Writing research through new media may not be simpler than writing it in a document, but it does offer elements that make research much easier to digest and understand. Many of the factors I discuss in my research—interactivity and visual elements chief among them—are significant additions to the illustration of my work. The peers who I showed my work to, many of whom are in different fields, had a much easier

time understanding my research when it was presented through multimedia tools than they did when they read my original project (a written case study on PBS Kids) or when they listened to my oral presentation. The same factors that make social media learning tools beneficial to K-12 children make a social media thesis more comprehensible for adults.

Finally, an online thesis is a thesis without an expiration date. One of the biggest and least-anticipated blessings of a research project on this platform is its ability to be modified. I am not obligated (and have no intentions of) ending the blog once I have submitted my thesis. My work can easily be updated as developments continued. Using new media has allowed this research project to be presented as more than a time capsule of a specific moment, but as a resource capable of evolving with its subjects. This trait will be especially prized when studying a subject like social media, which changes so rapidly that a study conducted five years ago rapidly devalues, but will be dear to anyone who has committed their academic careers to crafting materials on a particular subject. Databases no longer have to be the scholarly equivalent of museums. They can contain “living” research.

Final Reflections

I state in the conclusion section of my thesis blog that the uses of social media in K-12 literacy education are secondary to the ability to adapt to a new technology and integrate it into an educational system for the benefit of the students. I will end this reflection by concisely emphasizing the same thought and applying it to academic research. The various uses of social media in my project are much less important than what they are meant to represent; the ability and willingness of an academic scholar to explore how developments in technology can benefit the world of scholarly research. I hope that readers of my thesis and this reflection will spend less

time focusing on the tangible elements of my work and more time on the benefits and difficulties of sharing research online as a whole. It does not matter why I chose a Tumblr blog over Wordpress or Blogger. What matters is that I, and all of those currently doing research, have these choices available. My thesis examines how the internet is currently being used. In this conclusion I am asking you, the academically-trained, if it is being used *enough*. Can the internet (and new media in particular) help our research do more?

And, if so, what's stopping us from using it?

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Honors and Awards

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Ronald E. McNair Scholars Semester Achievement Award. Pennsylvania State University's Ronald E. McNair Program. Multiple semesters.

Second Graduating Class of the Paterno Fellows Program. Pennsylvania State University. Class of 2013.

National Society of Collegiate Scholars. Pennsylvania State University. Fall 2010.

Dean's List. Pennsylvania State University. Multiple semesters.

Professional Experience

New York Knicks Contributor
Lineage Interactive
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Writing Intern
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Social Media Intern
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Research Interests

I have always been interested in how communication and book publishing have developed throughout American history. I am particularly interested in how 20th century American culture has incorporated developments in communications technology to the world of literature.

Professional Presentations

The American Paradox: Defining Americanism through Carlos Bulosan's 'America is in the Heart'. The Ronald E. McNair Scholars Program. University Park, PA. July 9, 2011.

Publications and Papers

Flecha, Dulce-Marie. *The American Paradox: Discovering America in Carlos Bulosan's America is in the Heart*. The Pennsylvania State University McNair Scholars Journal: 2011. pp. 13-29