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"To Tweet or Not to Tweet: Using Twitter in the Literature Classroom"

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ABSTRACT: Twitter has proven itself to be one of the fastest growing and most popular social media services online today. The familiarity many of our students have with Twitter makes it an ideal tool to integrate into our classroom, but those of us unfamiliar with how it works may be unsure of how to do so. This article provides five strategies for incorporating Twitter into your literature classroom: adaptation, roleplaying, prequels & sequels, reader response blogging, and Twitter stream co-lecture.

Much like my favorite author, Kurt Vonnegut, I am a Luddite—an irony of sorts, since I am an allegedly a "digital native," born into a world of digital technology and therefore (presumably) well-versed in using it. I use Facebook and e-mail, but I have successfully avoided purchasing an iPhone, transitioning from my beloved print texts to the sleek electronic "pages" of the Kindle, and Tweeting the minutiae of my everyday life. I find myself easily frustrated by new technologies, not just because I have to learn how to use them effectively, but the ever-evolving nature of it forces constant re-learning. One need only look at Facebook, which has undergone various permutations of its interface and available services (the most recent being "Timeline"), leaving users to adjust, often begrudgingly, to the new possibilities (or limitations) of this now indispensable form of social communication.[1]

Of course, a curmudgeonly disdain, grounded perhaps in a laziness towards learning these new technologies, has not and will not prevent their seeming omnipresence from flourishing. What it risks doing is alienating me further from my students, whose daily lives remain wholly dependent on a range of new media to keep them connected to their family, friends, and even professors. Welcoming these aspects of their culture holds great potential for us in our never-ending quest to engage them and keep them focused. I have been amazed in the past how simply watching shows that my students enjoyed, like *Family Guy*, *Jersey Shore*, and *Teen Mom 2*, provided me with a valuable context for making connections with the material I was presenting in my literature and composition courses. (I must also admit the shows became a guilty pleasure.) Tools like Twitter empower students as writers, readers, and thinkers, and following the cues of our colleagues in fields like composition and rhetoric, we should embrace the possibilities of these digital tools to engage our students and to foster the textual, visual, and

[1] ABC News documents these modifications in Facebook's layout and services in this recent article: http://abcnews.go.com/Technology/wireStory/hits-misses-facebooks-year-history-17171801#.UEuSXPlzZXs .

digital literacies that will make them more commercially viable in the current job market seeking strong writers and problem solvers familiar with these emerging technologies.

I find students most responsive to class discussions when the material we are discussing is something with which they have familiarity or even expertise. Analyzing how a character like Lily Bart in *The House of Mirth* publicly presents herself usually may be like pulling teeth, but slightly shift that discussion to how people the character's age today publicly present themselves on Facebook or other social media, and they light up.[2] Profile pictures, "likes," photos, and even one's "handle" display the construction of one's digital identity, and students take great pleasure analyzing (and lightly mocking) the extent to which some people go to present an image of themselves in this very public, very easily manipulated space.[3] They know, in part, because they themselves are guilty. This classroom activity demonstrates a point Richard Beach et. al. makes in *Teaching Literature to Adolescents*: "People are more likely to be engaged in an activity with they have some sense of ownership in or responsibly for planning and participating in that activity" (7). With this observation in mind, I wondered how to bring Twitter, a popular "microblogging" service that connects user through short messages of 140 characters or less, into my classroom. I played around with the online social networking site, figuring out ways I could connect it to the texts and our class discussions. Then, I realized I was approaching the situation the wrong way: I, the novice, was attempting to show my students, the experts, how to use Twitter.[4]

My about-face was inspired by Duke University professor Cathy N. Davidson's recent book, *Now You See It: How the Brain Science of Attention Will Transform the Way We Live, Work, and Learn*. Davidson details the noted iPod experiment on her campus, in which college freshman and students in courses in which professors used the technology were all given iPods. The basic idea was simple: "We wondered what these astonishing young overachievers would do if given the chance not to follow the rules but to make them" (64). After playing around with the devices, the students told professors and administration innovative ways to use the iPods in the classroom. This endeavor predated Jeff Howe's term "crowdsourcing," but that is exactly

[2] Having students make mock Facebook profiles for literary characters is another excellent exercise for bringing social media into the classroom.

[3] I borrow the word "handle" to denote people who alter their real names on Facebook, using a nickname, a descriptive false middle name, etc.

[4] Those readers unfamiliar with Twitter may find this article and accompanying podcast from NPR's *Fresh* Air— http://www.npr.org/2011/02/16/133775340/twitters-biz-stone-on-starting-a-revolution —to be a helpful crash course in what Twitter is, how it has been used, and its social and political effects around the world.

what these students did (64-5). And I followed suit by asking my students to do the exact same thing.

This past summer, I taught an Introduction to Global Literature course, focusing primarily on twentieth century Anglophone literature examining, directly and indirectly, issues of imperialism and (post)colonialism. An Americanist by training, I selected various texts that had broad connections to the United States, such as *Karma Cola*, Gita Mehta's biting satire of Western spiritual travelers in India, and *A Small Place*, Jamaica Kincaid's jeremiad against the social, political, and economic effects of British colonialism and Western tourism in her native Antigua. Near the end of term, we read Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *The Thing Around Your Neck*, a 2009 short story collection chronicling lives of contemporary Nigerians in their home country and abroad. Many of the stories included also appeared in prominent American literary journals and magazines, like *The New Yorker, Zoetrope*, and the *Virginia Quarterly Review*, and the author has held fellowships from the MacArthur Foundation, Princeton University, and Harvard University. With the recent turn in American cultural studies towards transnationalism, I wanted to use Adichie's text as an opportunity to explore with my students the meaning of a term like "American literature." We considered questions like:

- Is the creative expression of non-Americans about the United States "American literature"?
- Is the creative expression of non-Americans written in the United States "American literature"?
- In today's globalized world, where people can travel frequently, easily live in foreign countries, read works in English and in translation from writers the world round, and communicate instantly with people in any country via telephone or the internet, does the term "American literature" create an unnecessary, even hostile, nationalist project?

I have no doubt any of these questions could yield an endless amount of graduate seminars and monographs. Interrogating these areas challenged areas many students, even those majoring in English, had not considered regarding canonicity, authorship, and national identity. But my intellectual concerns and classroom objectives did not end there. Certainly, as Louise M. Rosenblatt reminds us, our goals as literature teachers should be "to help the student toward a more and more controlled, more and more valid or defensible response to the text" (267). In the process, our students, majors and non-majors alike, develop the critical thinking

and writing skills that are the cornerstone of a liberal arts education. But another goal, equally important to most of us in the humanities and one that seems to intensify when teaching global literature, remains exposing students to different perspectives and experiences so as to develop their open-mindedness and worldliness. Rosenblatt approaches this concern as a mirror for the student, in which he becomes aware of "similar elements in his own nature and emotional life," and therefore "provid[ing] the basis for a release from unconscious fears" (191-2). I would say my interest lies more in the student seeing, even feeling,—if only for a moment—another person's experiences, be they surprisingly similar or drastically different to his or her own.

With these objectives in mind, I turned students "loose" on Twitter to see how my efforts to expose them to alternate subjectivities could be facilitated by the social media many of them use in their everyday lives. Twitter's defining feature is that it requires its users to express themselves in microblogs, called "Tweets," of 140 characters at a time. This limitation may actually be advantageous, because as any teacher of writing knows, verbosity can be intimidating for students to read and agonizing for a teacher to grade. The emphasis on concision proves to be mutually beneficial while underscoring the vital relationship between form and content that we as literature teachers know too well to be indivisible. Andy Jones's students also noted Twitter made them self-aware of both how and what they were saying: "we have to be so careful and precise with the words we choose" (qtd. in Jones 100). What follows are five strategies—some my students came up with, others I came up with after seeing what they had done—for incorporating Twitter into your own literature classroom.

- **Adaptation**

Encourage students to adapt the text or perhaps just a scene into a series of Tweets. In this instance, the Tweeter steps in for the author, retelling the story in a unique genre that may seemingly restrain him or her, but in fact encourages concision and clarity. This activity proves to be a valuable exercise in genre, showing students the qualities of genres, both in terms of form and content, as well as the various limitations of a given genre. Poetry, also challenging for its precision and brevity, may be an interesting comparison: Do tweets compose a prose poem, or a new narrative genre all together?

- **Roleplaying**

Another strategy is to have students adapt the story from the perspective of one of the characters, offering Tweets to chart the characters changes in attitudes and awareness. After the student has read the story, they can return to it to chart one character's development throughout and express it through a series of tweets. I found that students who did this exercise really enjoyed presenting it. The relative succinctness of Tweets allowed for a lot of humor, but students were also able to comment on aspects of the fictional Tweeter, like the default photograph, the handle, the mini-biography under the handle, as well as who the Tweeter was following. Such an exercise works to foster the empathy necessary to counteract what David Elkind has called "adolescent egocentrism": "fail[ure] to differentiate between the objects toward which the thoughts of others are directed and those which are the focus of his own concern" (1029).

- **Prequels & Sequels**

A productive endeavor for students may lie in considering the scope of the text: where does it start and where does it end. With this aspect in mind, students could produce a brief narrative (8 to 12 tweets) laying out the events of what happened before the opening or, especially in the instance of ambiguous endings, after the conclusion of the narrative. Providing a backstory allows students to consider what defining moments and influences helped create the complicated characters they meet in the story, while imagining a sequel uses the evidence from the story to imagine how characters who demonstrate those qualities will continue with their lives in light of what they faced in the narrative. For example, students could craft a backstory to imagine the nature of Fortunato's insult toward Montresor in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado" or how the girl will handle her pregnancy after the conclusion of Ernest Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants." Some purists may see this endeavor as tampering with classic American literature, but I would venture to say it indulges the kinds of questions many students ask us, but we are unable to answer (and should avoid answering). Echoing Rosenblatt's highly influential idea that "A novel or poem or play remains merely inkspots on paper until a reader transforms them into a set of meaningful symbols" (24), this activity teaches students that texts belong to the reader, too—not just the author—and that meaning is created in the transaction. Students, therefore, are liberated to explore

the ideas they have about the text, while we serve as facilitators who help them to develop and hone their impressions into a justifiable interpretation.

- **Reader Response Blogging**

A fun and effortless use of Twitter can be for students to record the impressions they have of the text as they read. Not only do these allow the students to record their shifting attitude toward the text, but they also reveal how readers make meaning of what they are reading. Perhaps that is why scholars in the history of the book have found marginalia such a valuable resource in historical studies of reading practices and literacy.

Andy Jones offers a useful strategy for focusing this practice in his recent essay, "How Twitter Saved my Literature Classroom." The QQCs (an acronym for *Quotation, Question, and Comment*) he employs streamlines students' notions about the reading into what ideally "fuction[s] as the equivalent of thesis statements: interesting and debatable assertions that require supporting evidence from the text" (94). The value of Jones's method lies in its preparation of students for writing well-developed interpretative essays that synthesize their critical thinking, writing, and reading skills. Furthermore, as Jones notes, it allows the instructor to track "discoveries and misconceptions" students are having while reading the text (95).

- **Twitter Stream Co-Lecture**

I call this feature a "co-lecture" because it's corresponds with a live lecture the instructor is giving. A Twitter stream is a real-time list of Tweets, united by a common hashtag, that updates as participants post a new Tweet with that hashtag. Building off of the live Twitter streams that have become commonplace at major conferences like Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) and the Modern Language Association (MLA) Annual Convention, the co-lecture allows students using the same hashtag to contribute to a stream of participant responses in real time. Proceeded by a number sign, a hashtag is a word or combined phrase (example: #lit2200) that links Tweets using that identifier. Not only can students silently join in the lecture, they can also pose questions or review their classmates' reactions.

The mechanics can be a bit tricky, but manageable with patience. Have students on their phones or laptops agree on a common hashtag unique to the class. Then, using the white search area in the top right corner, search for the results page of the hashtag. Appoint a student to manage the instructor's computer and refresh this webpage periodically, because tweets will accumulate until the link (saying "[number] new Tweets") is clicked or website is refreshed. While it may seem annoying, establishing a cue with the monitoring student allows you to manage the lecture and stream, preventing them from focus on the constant flicker of the Twitter stream.

An early proponent of this approach was Cole W. Camplese at Pennsylvania State University, who found it increased the quality of the discussion by adding another layer (Young). An obvious criticism of Camplese's methods would be it distracts students from paying attention to the content of his lecture. Yet recent humanist interest in cognitive science suggests otherwise. N. Katherine Hayles discusses two forms of attention: the deep attention needed for reading novels that is focused on one task and the hyper attention one uses for video games and the Internet that encourage the user to move quickly through linked material (187). Cathy N. Davidson adds, "Multitasking is the ideal mode of the twenty-first century, not just because of our information overload but because our digital age was structured without anything like a central node broadcasting one stream of information that we pay attention to at a given moment" (6). The length of a class and the lecture-format appears incompatible with the average student's deep attention span, but allowing students to alternate between two stimuli: the audiovisual instructor lecture and the visual Twitter stream may allow them to sustain focus longer. Furthermore, as Camplese does, instructors lucky enough to have two screens could further supplement the lecture with a PowerPoint, Prezi, or other visual accompaniment. Instructors should welcome the distraction of a live Twitter stream to digress into related topics of immediate interest to the students. Not only will such a tactic maintain student engagement throughout the class period, but it implicitly reassures students that you expect and respect their input into the learning process.

Admittedly, these activities presume you have the classroom technology that will allow you to project websites in your classroom. Many instructors may not have such access, so I would encourage you either to print out a selected students' Twitter page

> (with his or her consent), have students present what they posted, or choose highlights from the pages and discuss those with the class. I would encourage students to form Twitter accounts specifically for your class, so as to maintain a boundary between their personal lives and their responsibilities to you. It is also important for students to "follow" each other, so they have easy access to others' posts. A hashtag can also be used to follow a certain discussion. I suggest adhering to Jones's advice to develop one unique to your class that will easily delineate your messages from other competing strains on Twitter (102).

While I hope these techniques will prove helpful in your teaching, I do not celebrate Twitter without reservations. As Cynthia Selfe reminds us, we must not only teach with technology, but closely examine the implications of such technologies, especially in terms of economics, accessibility, and governmental intervention (414-6). After all, Twitter, in particular, has been the subject of much praise and controversy regarding its political uses and abuses, from the Arab Spring to the recent temporary censorship of journalist Guy Adams.

The omnipresence of digital media as well as the increasing popularity of "new media" in academic job advertisements makes it clear that we must adapt to these technologies, if not for ourselves, than certainly for our students. Because many of these technologies were created for commercial reasons, they continue to be user-friendly and manageable for even the most reluctant user willing to put forth the time to play around with it. While the literature remains the same, our students and our resources do not, and we must consequently take up this opportunity to incorporate these exciting possibilities into our classroom. In doing so, we foster the intellectual flexibility necessary for our students to thrive as professionals, citizens, and thinkers.

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