“Twitterdeee, twitterdumb”: Teaching in the Time of Technology, Tweets, and Trespassing

by Shelbie Witte

“Michael Jackson is dead,” I said, almost matter-of-factly, as though I’ve expected it to happen for some time now. As we drove down the highway towards the regional airport, I was immediately reminded of sitting in my brother’s clubhouse in 1977, my mother entering to tell us Elvis Presley had died.

“What are you, psychic?” my husband asked, glancing over to see me reading a response to the news on Twitter with my cell phone.

“No, Twitter,” I replied.

“Twitterdeee, twitterdumb” he remarked, his usual clever response when I mention reading something on Twitter, the social network microblog used by millions of subscribers. Authors are limited to text messages or “tweets” of 140 or fewer characters, allowing for quick, simultaneous message dissemination to all of one’s “followers” or friends.

My husband’s snub of Twitter should be taken in context of our technology backgrounds: we are on opposite sides of the digital immigrant and digital native divide (Prensky, 2001). In his ground-breaking article almost a decade ago, Prensky (2001) defines digital natives as those who are native speakers of the world of computers, internet and video games and digital immigrants as those who were born before this time. As a digital native, I have long used and been fascinated by the technologies available to us. As a middle-school and high-school teacher of English Language Arts for twelve years and now, as a teacher educator, much of my work has centered on finding ways to bridge the technologies of the ‘real world’ to the needs of students in my classroom.

When reading the call for manuscripts for this issue, I began to reflect on how far teachers have come, especially after Prensky’s article, in recognizing one’s own contributions to the uses of technologies within and outside of the classroom. Important, too, has been the willingness of schools and school districts to think beyond the definition of traditional classrooms when considering ways to invest in technologies for teachers and students.

Much has changed in the landscape of technology in the classroom during my career as a teacher. The technologies we studied in our Technology of Education course included an overhead projector, a tape recorder, a slide projector, a bulletin board, and a new invention, a gigantic contraption, meant to beam the computer monitor onto the wall or screen, the LCD projector. Immediately out of school, I began my career in a classroom with one of those projectors, but no computer. In different schools and districts, my classroom evolved from a lack of computer or internet access, to a teacher’s computer for grades and word processing, to a set of three computers for students to rotate through once a month, to a shared wireless cart of thirty laptops, to, currently, every student having access to some sort of digital device (cell phone, iTouch, laptop, PDA) at all times. My story will be familiar to many, as we have all experienced fluctuating degrees of access to resources throughout our careers. Too familiar, though, are the stories of lack of resources and access to technology throughout our country, the audacity of which deserves immediate attention and rectification.

As the tools of technology continue to evolve, so does my approach to their use in the classroom (Alvermann, 2000; Gee, 2003; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003). Through many, many trials and even more errors, I feel I’ve found a few ways to help students see the connections between the types of writing we perform in the classroom and the types of writing they perform in their own lives outside school. With the help of NCTE’s definition of 21st-century literacies (2008), I’ve guided students to an understanding of “literacy” and “texts” in “malleable” forms. And better yet, with NCTE’s Framework for 21st-Century Curriculum and Assessment (2009), I’ve been able to ground my instincts and hunches in policies supported by a national membership of literacy professionals. Yet I continue to struggle with many of the same issues I have always faced as a teacher of the English Language Arts, several of which are heightened in a classroom that embraces digital tools and environments.

Reading Stamina and Attention-Span

A recent series of commercials advertising Microsoft’s latest search engine, Bing, illustrates what I have witnessed in the classroom with many students using technology for research purposes. The commercials highlight the term “search overload”, a side effect of turning to search engines when needing information on anything in our daily lives. Using a search engine for information, a query for “subject X” often leads students to “subject Y” which leads them to “subject Z” and to different variations of “subject Z” and before we know it, students are struggling to focus, being swept away by the waves of the web.

Granted, this is not much different than my aimlessly wandering around the stacks of books in the local library, looking for the 99th quotation for my index cards to write my high-school term paper in the early Nineties. And yet, is it not? Nicholas Carr (2008), in his article “Is Google Making Us Stupid?” says that his Internet habits have trained his mind to take in information very quickly, the same way the Internet distributes it. Students are eager to find information and yet, when they can’t find it quickly, they hyperlink to another source, only scratching the surface to the wealth of information there is to discover.

Much like the struggle to have students read and use the definition...
beyond the one first listed in the dictionary, my students often want to use the first sites found, reputable or not. I also continue to struggle with the lack of depth in their research skills. The critical thinking skills of analysis and synthesis, perhaps two of the most important reasons for the teaching of research in the English Language Arts, are all but forgotten as students are resistant to the commitment of time. I wonder if my students were ever “scuba divers in a sea of words” or if they have been conditioned to absorb information quickly, “much like a guy on a Jet Ski.” (Carr, 2008).

Reading stamina, or lack thereof, has also become an issue heightened by the uses of technologies in my classroom. During the state reading assessments over the past three years, my students became increasingly irritable and fidgety while reading the text passages, often only two or three pages in length on the computer screen. Many would walk to the candy bowl for a peppermint, ask for a restroom pass, or float off into meditation while staring at the computer screen.

Focusing on a few pages of text should be easy, I thought. Increasingly not, according to teachers and students alike. Carr (2008) also addresses this issue, explaining “immersing myself in a book or a lengthy article used to be easy. My mind would get caught up in the narrative or the turns of the argument, and I’d spend hours strolling through long stretches of prose. That’s rarely the case.” Society is inundated with SMS text messages, scrolling banner lines on television shows, and Twitter tweets from around the world, short, instantaneous avenues to communication that require only brief moments of concentration to absorb a message.

While I’m an avid texter and Twitter user, I’m not convinced that using text messaging and Twitter in the classroom is the key to tapping in to the short attention spans of students. I do think that the brevity of their use deserves some discussion with or students. What are the benefits and drawbacks to communicating through text and SMS messages? What does a message lack when limited to a few characters? What do we miss when we take shortcuts to communicating with others? In a world of technology, how can we build or rebuild reading stamina in adolescents? We need further study on the impact of technology on students’ attention spans and reading stamina.

Trespassing on Students’ Digital Environments

An enlightening parent conference with a reluctant student writer in 2005 encouraged me to use blogs with preservice teachers and students in my middle-school classroom (Witte, 2007). Students eagerly wrote on the blog in a way I had always hoped they would write on paper, with insightful analysis and commentary, full of voice and intensity. After traversing a few stumbling blocks with access and privacy issues, using a blog as a way of responding to literature became a routine activity in my classroom. We were soon experimenting with Wikis, Blogger, Google Docs, and most recently Nings, as a way for students to write and respond to the writing of their peers (Kajder, 2006; Richardson, 2008). The desire to socialize and connect with others was a powerful motivator for students to write.

Once, while reading the writing on my classroom blog, I noticed a hyperlink to a student’s personal blog and followed it to discover a treasure trove of original poetry and song lyrics. Overwhelmed by his talent and proud of the work he had done, I posted a positive response to one of the poems in the space for comments. I was shocked to read his response to my comment “Thanks for trespassing.”

Trespassing? Had I invaded his personal space? The World Wide Web, with its infinite capacity, seems to have an “Everyone’s Welcome!” sign. I was filled with regret as I contemplated the concept of students writing online for school as different from students writing online for different purposes. I had unintentionally connected two worlds of writing that the student did not want to overlap. When we try new technologies, especially those popular with adolescents, in order to engage them in our classrooms, are we trespassing?

Are adolescents fickle in the digital spaces they are willing to share with adults? Recent analyses of social networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook show that as more and more adults migrate to these digital class and family reunions, adolescents are making a massive exodus from the sites. Marshall Kirkpatrick (2009), of the website ReadWriteWeb, estimates that there are more grandparents using Facebook than high school students. Kirkpatrick notes that “just when all the grown ups started figuring out Facebook, college and high school users have declined in absolute number by 20% and 15% respectively in a mere six months, according to estimates Facebook provides to advertisers that were archived for tracking by an outside firm” (Kirkpatrick, 2009). Where have all the kids gone?

Bridging popular culture to classroom curriculum is critical in helping students understand the world of media and technology (Alvermann, et. al. 1999). And yet, much like a reaction when finding out a parent is to chaperone at the school dance, many students react to a teacher’s use of popular culture and technology as lame and unoriginal. We are unwired guests on their “turf”, trespassing. As teachers in a time of technological change, we are constantly creating new ways to bring the outside lives of students into the classroom. We experiment with the technologies that our students flock to, trying desperately to understand how to tap into the engagement, motivation, and creativity of the social collaborations that take place there. Are we welcome? Under what terms? Where are the untold boundaries between in-school and out-of-school literacy practices?

Not answers, just more questions

We know that using technology as a tool in the classroom is critical to the literacy practices of our students. We know that providing access to technology allows students an infinite bookshelf of knowledge, a global audience, and a cultural collaboration unlike anything we can duplicate. We also know that the use of technology in and out of the classroom is creating change in the ways our students find and comprehend information and the speed in which they expect to comprehend it. We have discovered, through trial and error, that despite our greatest efforts to incorporate students’ outside lives into
our classrooms, many students would prefer their cultural practices and
discourse communities to have clear boundaries.

As a teacher of 21st-century literacies, I continue to grapple with
more over-arching questions about adolescent literacy than ever before.
I continue to consider carefully what it means for students to be
literate, the malleable ways in which students learn, and the ways in
which knowledge is disseminated and consumed. Without careful
consideration of these questions, teachers will certainly be left behind.
We have learned so much, and still have much to learn.

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About the Author:
Shelbie Witte is an assistant professor of English education
and the Director of Research for the Florida State
University Writing Project.

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