# Character Journaling Through Social Networks

EXEMPLIFYING TENETS OF THE NEW LITERACY STUDIES

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When used for character journaling, social networks can provide a culturally relevant, collaborative, and multi-genre forum through which students can make new meanings with texts.

Social networking, the web-based services where individuals construct a public or semi-public profile, make connections with others in that media, and use the forum for multiple forms and styles of communication (Boyd & Ellison, 2007), has become increasingly ubiquitous during the past decade. Transcending nationalities, cultures, and generations, social networking increasingly helps people worldwide connect with others, promote their ideologies, and learn about issues (socialmediatoday.com). Social networking has become especially popular with younger generations, supplanting face-to-face interaction and the telephone as their preferred means of communication (Ledbetter et al., 2010). Yet despite social
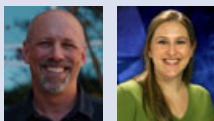
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networking's many connections to the tenets of the New Literacy Studies (NLS) and its cultural relevance to adolescents and young adults, many educators continue to view its classroom uses with skepticism. Rather than envisioning some of the myriad positive classroom uses of social networking such as the one described here (see Figure 1), the bulk of lawmakers and school administrators instead have been influenced by salacious media reports regarding social networking in schools (see Figure 2) and have consequently either banned or unquestioningly supported prohibitions on social networking in classrooms.

We believe this approach to social networking is counterproductive. Bans on classroom uses of social networking ignore the latter's pedagogical promises, hinder educators' ability to teach appropriate uses of the technology, erase what could be a useful tool for classroom-home communication, and further divide school curriculum from the things that most interest our students.

Fortunately, resistance to the use of social networking in classrooms and schools is slowly

beginning to shift. School administrators increasingly see that social networking can be an effective tool for

fundraising, for communication between schools and communities, and between teachers, their students, and parents (National School Boards Association, 2007). More locally, innovative teachers have—often surreptitiously—integrated components of social networking into specific lessons in order to create engaging and culturally relevant learning opportunities for their students. At the center of this enterprising group are English Language Arts teachers, who recognize that literature is replete with examples of social networking (Gatsby, for example, relied upon social networking to reconnect with Daisy), who recognize that social networking can be an avenue to improved student writing (Tenore, 2013), and who know from their own classroom experiences that "English relies on social networks to get its work done" (Rozema, 2009, p. 40). Following suit, software developers have

FIGURE 2 Recent media treatment of social networking in schools. This figure illustrates the negative and largely one-sided media coverage of social networking's entrée into schools

recognized schools as a potentially lucrative market and have created myriad "school friendly" social networking sites.

Similarly, there is a burgeoning body of research focused on social media and social networking as pedagogical tools (e.g., Hungerford-Kresser, Wiggins, Amaro-Jimenez, 2011; Johnson, 2010; McWilliams, et al., 2011; West, 2008; Yang, 2009). These researchers validate what many teachers already know anecdotally: social networking can help engage students in learning.

Elizabeth Lewis' "Friending Atticus Finch" (2012), for example, examines how the use of certain components of social networking engages students in explorations of literature. Our study builds on Lewis' work by "going live" with the use of social networking as a learning tool. In conducting this study, our primary research question was "In what ways do students' interactions as characters on this multimedia format exemplify the idea that meaning is created and negotiated via collaboration, context, and through specific uses of language?" By chronicling some of the ways in which students made meaning while character journaling on Facebook, we demonstrate how social networking can be a powerful tool for literary analysis, discourse studies, and a fuller understanding of the theories undergirding the NLS (McWillaims, et al., 2011). In the coming pages, we provide a rationale for using social networking as pedagogy, detail the project itself, and discuss the practical implications of this study for secondary ELA teachers.

Conceptual Framework

Social Networking: Popular, Relevant, and Illicit

Currently more than one billion people use the two largest social networking sites (Facebook and Twitter) daily, a statistic that does not account for other social networking both extant and emerging. Accounting for the bulk of users are adolescents and young adults who access their preferred networks via smart phone technology (Pew Research Center, 2012). With no

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need for a computer to access social networks, youth today are Facebooking and Twittering anywhere and everywhere, including in our classrooms.

Social networking's largely surreptitious entree into classrooms has, however, not always been well received. Skeptical school administrators, parents, and even many teachers—while themselves using social networking for communication, entertainment, and learning—have resisted its appearance in classrooms. School administrators, who set policy for classrooms, have tended to view social networking as a distraction that hinders student learning, provides an unmanageable avenue for bullying, and facilitates cheating (Blazer, 2012; Fouts, 2012). They have also tended to ignore the important links between adolescent identity and social connectedness via technology (Sweeny, 2010).

Thus, rather than co-opting adolescents' drive to stay in touch as a means to connect them to curricula, educators and administrators have instead created obstacles to such unofficial (Apple, 1993) communication. Most American school districts—and even some state legislatures—have banned social networking from classrooms (Cramer & Hayes, 2010). Unfortunately, such measures invalidate a major signifier of youth culture, make illicit a culturally relevant teaching tool, eliminate opportunities to teach about social networking safety, and discount a useful tool for communicating with parents, students, and the larger community (Varlas, 2011). These bans also ignore the emergence of "school friendly" sites that mirror popular social media but come with numerous safeguards and teacher controls.

Social Networking and Socially Situated Literacy

A new generation of literacy teachers is thinking and teaching in new ways. They are both consciously and unconsciously putting into practice the theories elucidated in the NLS. Primary among these is the notion that our understanding of what counts as literacy must be expanded beyond the reader-text dyad, or as McWilliams and colleagues (2011) state, we must embrace "…the constellations of practices that constitute 'literacy' in a new social digital and participatory culture" (p. 1). People make meaning not just through text or spoken words but through context; we "read" body language, images, signs, sounds, and countless other things, all of which affect how we interpret a communication event. Traditional notions of literacy are, ultimately, inadequate for explaining how people

come to understand their world (Leander & Sheehy, 2005; Street, 2005). Social networking capitalizes on this notion by welcoming personal expression through multiple media (the profile page with no images, text, or hyperlinks proves to be a very lonely space).

Similarly, NLS theory holds that readers bring to their interactions with texts a wealth of prior experiences, histories of social conditioning and positioning, and biases. All of these affect the meaning readers take from texts (Gee, 2000a, 2002; Street, 1995, 2005). Texts are, in this sense, alive and evolving with the individuals and societies that read them. Users of social networking, similarly, post their ideas, experiences, and interpretations of events for others to see and to discuss. Social networking sites derive much of their richness from their ability to bring disparate people into contact and conversation.

The New Literacy Studies hold that meaning is contextual and socially determined (Larson & Marsh, 2005; New London Group, 1996; Street, 2005). The ideas we ultimately take away from a text or interaction develop largely in and through social engagement. We come to understand the ideas in a text, a movie, or a news report, for example, not just through seeing, hearing, or reading about them but through our discussions with others about those issues. There can be no doubt that users of social networks negotiate and create new meanings through their online interactions; as part and parcel of the threaded discussions inherent to many social networking sites, users reify, edit, amend, and even delete things they have said in and through social interaction.

Social networking also exemplifies the NLS idea that meaning is shaped by discourse (Gee, 2000a, 2000b; Hymes, 1974); the language used to convey messages—whether in speech, text, images, or nonverbal communication—affects the meaning taken from those messages. Assuming that users of social networks have at least some diversity in their network of "friends," they cannot help but encounter different forms of discourse in their interactions. Relatedly, users of social networking frequently encounter and engage in code switching (Myers-Scotton, 1989) to suit their particular contexts and goals.

Finally, social networking exemplifies the "digital turn" in new literacies. Digital literacies are global rather than local, instant rather than delayed, multimodal rather than uniform, and they expand upon—and make more complex—the "semiotic systems" users use to create meaning (Leander & Sheehy,

2004; New London Group, 2000; Pahl & Roswell, 2006). Users of digital communication have created new rules for communication that, in turn, affect how they understand what they hear, read, and see. Not surprisingly, this digital turn is also culturally relevant to today's youth. Young people today increasingly communicate and learn—albeit informally—through social networking (Gee, 2002b; Palfrey & Gasser, 2008; Prensky, 2010). It should be no surprise that when used judiciously, social networking can provide educators with a culturally relevant way to engage today's learners (Bull et. al, 2008).

Data Collection

The following study was conducted at a large public university where all 18 students in an English methods course volunteered to participate in a project that merged character journaling (Hancock, 1993) with social networking. Prior to reading Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the students and their instructor (White) created Facebook profiles for their respective characters and, during the course of eight weeks of reading the text, used their network of "friends" as the forum through which they analyzed Lee's text.

Utilizing the tenets of participant observation (Spradley, 1980) and participatory action research (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2008), White collected data through detailed field notes throughout the project. White also collected artifacts in the form of all correspondence regarding the project (primarily via e-mail) and twice weekly screenshots of each student's character page. These screen shots captured both the ongoing dialogue between students (each page contained the entirety of communication between this "friends" network) and all of the different forms of media students used to express themselves as characters. White also collected open-ended surveys that were designed to solicit information about the following: a) student satisfaction with the approach; b) possible hurdles teachers of grades 6-12 might face using this method; c) students' views on secondary ELA students' buy-in (or not) to the approach; d) links between the approach and specific tenets of the NLS; e) time spent posting, responding to posts, and updating profile pages; and f) any additional ideas, thoughts, concerns, etc. students had regarding their experiences. These surveys were collected and held by a third party until course grades had been submitted.

Data were first examined via an open coding strategy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and then through domain, componential and taxonomic analyses (Spradley, 1980). The initial domains that emerged included "language and code switching," "nonverbal expression," "contextual understanding/statements," "meaning-making via text," "meaning-making via discourse/interaction," "differing interpretations," and "negotiated interpretations/changed interpretations." White then subdivided data into smaller subdomains (with many examples crossing over into multiple domains). Two additional measures helped ensure the validity of the data and findings. First, participants were asked to provide feedback on White's initial interpretations of the data, thereby ensuring the accurate representation of the perspectives and experiences of all participants (Eisner, 1998). Second, Hungerford-Kresser (the second author) joined the project to review the data, to critique earlier write-ups of the findings, and to help incorporate resulting data into later versions of the manuscript.

The Study: Character Journaling Through a Social Network

To get students started with their social networking character journaling, White modeled his expectations through the Atticus Finch page that he had created (see Figure 3). He showed how he populated Atticus' profile page via use of direct textual evidence (e.g., Atticus' hometown and career), inferred evidence (e.g., Atticus' political beliefs), evidence derived from a mix of historical context and poetic license (e.g., Atticus' taste in music, books, and film), and from his imagination (data from Internet searches as well as images from the 1962 film adaptation). Atticus' page then served as the hub through which the class journaling/discussion network was formed. It is important to note that with additional scaffolding, this modeling technique could be used in secondary ELA classrooms both to help students grasp an instructor's standards as well as to demonstrate how to draw inferences from texts (Lewis, 2012).

In assuming roles, students either volunteered to "be" a favorite character or were assigned a character, an option that increased student buy-in (as evidenced by many students' eagerness for specific roles) and differentiated reading roles and posting responsibilities. A by-product of this method was that students already familiar with the text helped scaffold the story for those who were not by answering questions and posting supplemental

information. Those new to the text were required to post for their characters but, as lesser characters, could focus more of their energies on reading. It is important to note that all students were required to post regularly, even if their character had yet to appear in the text (in this case by using all capitals).

With detailed instructions and a model to follow, students were then tasked with creating character pages. They were asked to start populating their character pages prior to reading so that they might gain a fuller understanding of the social contexts of the novel. Populating their pages, for example, required that students conduct minor research into the historical contexts of the Depression Era South. These pages were not to remain static, however; students were expected to alter their pages based upon events in the novel and upon their imagination and interpretations of the text. Finally, having linked their characters in a dedicated and secure *To Kill a Mockingbird* "friends" network, the students began reading and responding to the novel from their respective characters' points of view and in language appropriate to those characters.

Findings

Multiple Modes and Multiple Literacies

On their Facebook profile pages students incorporated a wide variety of genres and forms of expression. They used information gleaned from the text, from inferences reasonably deduced from that text, and from sociohistorical research. Their pages—which included both historical and contemporary photographs, references and links to music and film titles popular during that era, newspaper articles from the era, artwork, videos, and quotes—were rich with multiple forms of media that helped frame both the character and the story. In creating their profile pages, students did not merely take on the role of a character and assume that other students saw that character similarly—an attitude reminiscent of Goody's "autonomous model" (1968) of reading. Rather, students constructed characters based upon their unique interpretations of the text/context; each character profile page reflected that student's tastes, interests, prior knowledge, and creativity.

One student, for example, posted a "Playbill" for Scout's upcoming performance in the school play (with "I'm a Ham!" printed above a drawing of Scout in costume) and used the Facebook Events function to 'invite' her fellow townsfolk to the production. The student playing Mrs. Dubose posted numerous pictures of the

character's prized flowers with the associated caption, "My beautiful Snow on the Mountain Camellias are the pride and envy of everyone in town." As the character Mayella faced increased criticism from townsfolk/readers, her page featured a drawing of a scared young woman being pulled in opposite directions by dark and amorphous forces. Boo Radley's page included haunting images of outside scenes filtered through a window covered with gossamer curtains. Calpurnia's page almost always had a favorite quote, including this

one following the trial: "Law is not law if it violates the principles of eternal justice." In short, students made excellent use of the variety of formats welcomed by this medium to humanize and represent their respective characters in ways that reflected the former's individual views. This personalized and multimodal representation of characters, in turn, influenced how readers came to see both their own and other characters.

By posting character "status updates" and their own views as they read the novel, students

FIGURE 4 Facebook posts regarding the destruction of Mrs. Dubose's flowers. This post demonstrates the nature of the students' interactions as characters, their use of language appropriate to their characters, and White's ongoing role as Atticus throughout the project
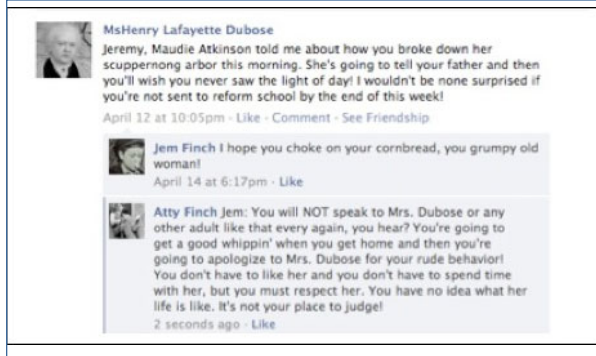
necessarily wrote across genres and contexts—again a central tenet of the NLS. Jem at one point passionately and childishly defended Scout and himself (see Figure 4) while at another point he spoke philosophically of his desire to emulate his father.

Mr. Ewell posted both a fatherly defense of his daughter's character and thinly veiled racist propaganda meant to "rile up" the town's White citizens. Sheriff Heck Tate responded to the latter by posting an official reminder that townspeople must uphold the law (a notice from "The Office of the Sheriff" that contained faux legal statutes) but later posted an impassioned editorial about 'legal' injustices. Tom Robinson pleaded to the people of Maycomb for justice—"being good Christian folk you've gotta know this ain't right"—while he ranted in his "private journal" about his anger over the injustices he faced. At numerous points the minor character Dolphus, who feigned being the town drunkard, used slurred words and confusing logic to post his reactions to events; yet he later explained his public persona to Scout and Jem using clear language that revealed his more authentic self: "To live the life I want, it's best to let them [the townspeople] judge me. Otherwise, they'd try to control me."

The Evolution and Negotiation of Meaning

Mirroring the NLS theory that the meaning of a text is not static were character pages that evolved with the story. Scout, for example, went from trusting that justice "had to win" to a sad but more realistic view that "justice just can't win out if people

ain't true to it." Mayella's posts, which went from confident and defensive to confused and grief-stricken, represented both an evolving point of view and great internal conflict. One of her final posts was "getting what ya want and what others says is right for ya don't bring nothing but misery." The non-textual modes students used to represent their characters and these characters' respective views also evolved both in substance and tone through the course of the novel. Scout, Dill, and Jem each posted images, music, and other information that showed a fast and sad maturation as events unfolded. At the end of the trial, for example, Dill replaced his profile picture from one of himself (the actor in the 1962 film) to an image of a dead mockingbird (see Figure 5).

Using social networking for character journaling allowed for extensive use of multiple literacies, for students to incorporate prior knowledge and present interpretations into their online discussions, and thus for cooperative learning; it put into focus the NLS hypothesis that meaning is constructed socially and, subsequently, that meaning can change in and through social contexts. In this case, students' posts helped scaffold the story, the characters, and the historical contexts of the novel for those new to the text and in many cases provided new insights to students already familiar with it. This resulted in new and multifaceted interpretations of the story and its contexts. For instance, Sheriff Heck Tate put Atticus' ability to shoot in context not only for the Finch children but for other readers: "He's a dead-eye for sure, but shootin's not something he's particular proud of. He

FIGURE 5 Image of dead mockingbird. The student playing the role of Dill Harris visually represented his character's loss of innocence by posting this image at the conclusion of Tom Robinson's trail

Maycomb News Archive

don't like to make a show of guns and violence… his kind of power don't need guns." Heck later provided historical context for the novel by posting newspaper images of the Scottsboro trial, an obvious miscarriage of justice in which nine African American males were convicted by an all-White jury of raping two White women (see Figure 6).

This proved important to how students read and interpreted the novel. One student noted this on her end-of-project survey: "I hadn't realized how the story was probably written because of some real events that Lee would've known about [until I] saw that headline picture Heck's page."

This online network proved to be not only a conduit through which students expressed their beliefs about characters and issues, but it was a medium where they were uniquely challenged to question those beliefs. Participants/readers were responsible not just to their teacher but to each other; as a result, their ideas and interpretations were open to challenge. Thus they were responsible for and faced pressure to "get it right" or, failing that, to alter or change their posts based upon the wealth of feedback they received in the forum. In practice this meant that students had to be able to justify their views with information from the text, with contextual information, and in many cases against the views and information other students brought to the same reading. In many cases, other characters' posts prompted students to rethink previously held assumptions.

Most notable in this regard was how some students' feelings toward Mayella Ewell shifted with the nature of posts on her and other characters' pages. While many participants initially dismissed Mayella as "small minded," "racist," and "Southern White trash," their views softened via a variety of

feedback from other readers/characters. Throughout their reading of the novel, students posted a multitude of theories about Mayella, all of which might help explain her behavior: she may have been raped by her father; she was desperately lonely and craved any attention, good or bad; she felt stuck in powerlessness; she was a product of her culture; and even that she was "a pawn stuck between different world views." The character playing Mayella certainly added to the complexity of her character; she justified her racist views by posting a movie poster for "The Birth of a Nation," the hugely successful, influential, and racist movie that many people of her generation would have known (see Figure 7) but later posted the aforementioned image of a woman torn in opposite directions.

Through the multiplicity of voices engaged in the project, students' views on this and on other important issues evolved as they progressed through the text. One said on the culminating survey that "I hated her [Mayella] at first and can't say I much like her now…but [student _____] did her different (sic) than I would have. I kind of saw into what motivated her, what made her who she was." Most simply put, the interactive nature of Facebook combined with character journaling prompted these students to negotiate how they came to understand the text and the world it represents.

Dialect, Code Switching, and "The N-Word"
The NLS show that meaning cannot be divorced from context. This includes the language or mode by which ideas are expressed. The way in which ideas are expressed is part and parcel of how one interprets these ideas. Social networking sites like Facebook, when used in the way described here, force students to think more closely about these

FIGURE 7 Movie Poster for *The Birth of a Nation*. The student playing the role of Mayella Ewell posted this image as "proof" of while superiority and the dangers posted by minorities
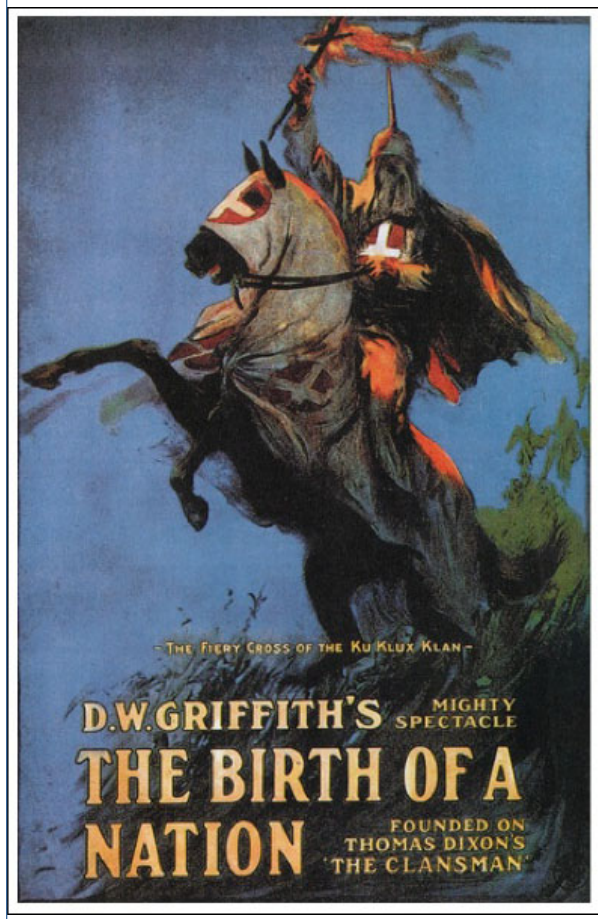
connections. Students were required to represent characters using the language and vocabulary appropriate to those characters. This meant that students had to think about and engage in code switching.

In this case, students made frequent use of Southernisms, idioms, dialect, and slang. Playing Southerner characters, most students made extensive use of "ain't," "fixin' to" and "might should." The Black characters used a smattering of Black Vernacular: "I be mighty scared o' dese folk and what'n they might do" (Tom Robinson). Those playing children (Scout, Jem, and Dill) incorporated the language common among Southern children; they consciously broke grammar rules in their posts (e.g., "Me and Jem went…"), they complained ("aw," "darn-it"), and used "yeah" instead of "yes" (except for when speaking to Atticus, in

which case they code-switched back to more formal speech). Students even found and used Southern idioms to express their characters' respective views. Dill posted that Mrs. Dubose was "madder than a wet hen" after her roses were trampled, and Heck Tate once said, "I ain't got a dog in that fight." In short, because students using this medium had to play roles that simultaneously influenced and were influenced by other "players," they had to alter their language to, as one student said, "be the character." As Figure 4 demonstrates, students adapted their language both for their characters and to suit the particular context; they had to communicate to and across cultures in this social realm.

It is important for classroom teachers to note that this code switching, though generally fun, was not without controversy. One student's use of code switching brought to the fore an unanticipated but nonetheless critical issue for the literacy classroom: the necessity to address, put into context, and ultimately deconstruct highly charged language. In this instance, Mayella posted to Atticus that "You should be ashamed of yerself fer takin a nigger's word over that of a good Christian White woman like me." Though the language and the tone of the post were harsh, the student was being true to her character. Playing the role of Atticus and understanding the contexts for the post, White chose to address this possibly contentious issue in character (e.g., as Atticus might): "Miss Ewell, you know I don't take kindly to such language. Tom's my client and a good man. In our house we respect all of God's creatures." Atticus' measured and contextually valid response not only diffused the situation, we believe that it helped promote a safe forum for explorations of language and ideology. This instance promoted an extended and timely classroom conversation—outside of the forum—on how to address the use of charged vocabulary (e.g., the "n-word" in Twain and in other literature, in popular music, or in class).

The requirement that students be authentic to their characters via code switching ultimately led to greater realism in their posts and to deeper explorations of language in context. As these examples suggest, using social networking for character journaling prompted these students to consider culturally relevant discourse and to engage in code switching. It provided students with a mirror for or, as the case may be, as a foil against which they

created their characters' discursive styles. Having to communicate in and across different discourses prompted students to alter their ways of speaking and, quite possibly, their ways of thinking.

Engagement in Literary Exploration

Finally, it is important to note that this project—and subsequent repetitions of this project using *The Book Thief* and *The Hunger Games*—proved very popular. Students consistently cited this project as a highlight of the semester on their university-administered end-of-course evaluations. Students were more specific about why they enjoyed the approach on their end-of-project surveys. To varying degrees and in a variety of ways almost all students noted that the approach was "fun" *because* it forced them to be creative in ways other examinations of literature did not. Combining social network's extensive use of multi-media with "live" discussions fostered deeper critical thinking: "Unlike a worksheet or essay, students can't find answers in the text or copy and paste information. They have to use critical thinking skills to interact with other students, create events, and display their character's personality in a way that is rounded and complex" (student playing Jem). Furthermore, the medium itself engendered deeper interest in and understanding of characters and their contexts. Said one, "The project took me from reading the lines to reading between the lines by forcing me to get into a character's head and think about who he really is…by adopting these characters and becoming so close to them, a natural interest in the text or its surrounding themes just naturally evolves" (student playing Scout).

For Teachers: Possibilities, Limitations, and Caveats

Practicing teachers will no doubt face limitations with implementation that White did not. First is administrative and/or parental skepticism and possible resistance. The teacher's best answers are, we believe, a strong research-based rationale for the approach and transparency in its execution (McWilliams, et al., 2011). An open invitation to parents and administrators to examine specific uses of social networking is one possibility. Additionally, the teacher should provide, require, and monitor specific privacy settings built into the medium and forge a contract with students respecting these

safeguards. Teachers might alleviate most safety concerns by substituting one of the 'educationally friendly' social networking sites for Facebook. Edmodo, for instance, mirrors Facebook in look and function and capitalizes on students' abilities and interests connected to social networking. Edmodo and its rivals for the educational market come with built-in teacher controls, added security measures, and are thus more readily acceptable to school administrators and parents.

Second, the class in this study consisted of only 18 students. Classroom teachers wishing to use this approach with larger groups or with multiple classes would need to alter it to meet their specific needs. We suggest one of three approaches. In the first approach, multiple students post as a specific character but are differentiated by their character's name or title (aka "Amy's Scout"). This format, which White used with *The Book Thief* (Zusak, 2006), allowed participants to experience and to judge differing interpretations of a character. In the second approach, the entire class remains in one network, but the teacher arranges students playing a shared character into groups in which they discuss their concepts, ideas, and possible posts with each other before sharing them broadly with others (similar to a Jigsaw strategy). This format gives the teacher more opportunity to review and discuss issues with students prior to posts "going live." In the third approach, teachers break the class into multiple groups, each of which has the book's main characters and a corresponding network, a process White used with *The Hunger Games* (Collins, 2008). Though this approach requires additional teacher preparation time and oversight, it allows greater differentiation of texts within or across classes. There are likely other options or hybrids of these three options that we have yet to examine.

Finally, we recognize working with college students is different than working with high school students. Secondary ELA teachers attempting a project like this one should allow for additional time and effort to explain the process, to set up and maintain the forum, and to answer student questions and address technical problems. Similarly, because these project participants were college students, they likely brought to their reading and their posts additional prior knowledge, reading ability, and research skills than would most adolescents. This is not to suggest, however, that middle or high

school readers would be any less insightful than were these students; rather, adolescent readers may—because of their different contexts and buoyed by the inherent scaffolding of the text provided by this forum—discover and share insights that the study participants did not. Our point is that secondary teachers should be prepared for different forms of expression and different demonstrations of learning than those described here.

Conclusion

In the beginning, we noted that social networking has clear connections to socially mediated learning, to the tenets of the NLS, and at the same time is culturally relevant to many adolescents and young adults. The work with these pre-service teachers demonstrates just some of the possible and positive classroom uses of social networking sites. Though by no means an easy endeavor, this approach to reading and interpreting literature is rife with possibilities, many of which cannot be addressed here and many of which we have yet to acknowledge or examine. Our hope is that these students' experiences might serve as a model for ELA professionals looking to experiment with social networking or as a point of departure for yet further explorations using this technology.

The responsibility for determining, creating, and negotiating meaning belongs to our students, and anything we can do to help empower them is worth attempting (McWilliams, et al., 2011). Similar to McWilliams, et al., 2011, who argue that their work with social networking (Twitter) was about developing creative strategies for perspective-taking while creating communities of readers and writers, the experiences of our participants—who took the approach further by "becoming" characters and utilizing those characters' forms of language—were enhanced by the use of this medium. In our study, meaning was made not just in what was said or posted on the site but in the threads that linked all of the characters, the story, and the students together. Social networking is a convenient tool that provides a culturally relevant and media rich space where meaning(s) can be negotiated and created.

In his overview of just some of the pedagogical possibilities of social networking in the ELA classroom, Robert Rozema (2009) notes that

Take Action
STEPS FOR IMMEDIATE IMPLEMENTATION

- Choose an appropriate text and a social networking site for this approach.
- Allay possible skepticism of the approach with a research-based rationale for it and publicize the safeguards you have in place.
- Envision what you want your learning outcomes to be and create explicit rules for the project based upon these outcomes, your knowledge of your students, and your knowledge of specific social networking sites.
- Recognize that you may need to alter the assignment to meet unanticipated issues and have a way to communicate changes to students clearly and efficiently.
- Provide computer access, time, and technological assistance to students who may not otherwise have access to social networks.
- Provide an alternative but nonetheless interactive assignment for students who may (or whose parents may) object to the use of social networking.

the pedagogical opportunities afforded by social networking technologies [are] limited only by our imaginations…[they] will multiply as social networks extend their reach, further redefine privacy, and weave themselves more inextricably into the fabric of adolescent and adult life. Today and tomorrow, our students will be networked. Perhaps their teachers should be as well. (p. 42)

We as educators thus have a choice: we can see social networking's emerging presence in classrooms as an invasion to be resisted or we can see it as yet another tool by which to engage our students in new ways of reading, writing, and exploring their world (McWilliams, 2011)—and then give it a shot.

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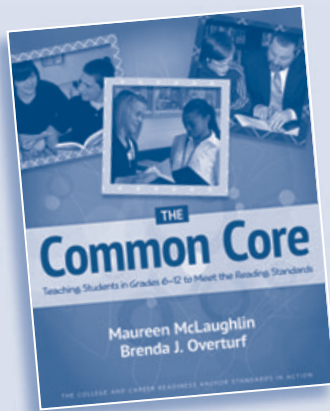Zusak, M. (2006). *The book thief.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

More to Explore
CONNECTED CONTENT-BASED RESOURCES

Please visit the authors' *Character Journaling through Social Networking* website at http://johnwesleywhite.net/wordpress/?page_id=529 or johnwesleywhite.net for the following:

✓ Detailed teacher information on how to prepare for and conduct character journaling through social networking;

✓ Downloadable organizational/management charts, student handouts, and participation "rules";

✓ A series of screen shots of students' character pages (for To Kill a Mockingbird, The Book Thief, and The Hunger Games);

✓ Resources explaining The New Literacy Studies and the theory of code switching;

✓ A list of resources (online resources, peer-reviewed journal articles, and books) that support the use of social networking as pedagogy;

✓ A list of "school friendly" social networking sites;

✓ A copy of the end-of-project survey questions with select student responses.