Exploring social networking: developing critical literacies

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2012

Abstract

While schools have been using computers within their classrooms for years now, there has been a purposeful ignoring of the growing power of social networks such as Facebook and Twitter. Many schools ban students from accessing and using sites such as Facebook at school and many English and literacy teachers ignore or deny their value as a teaching tool. With the growth of technology we have seen shifts in educational pedagogy in relation to computers, but as educators we may still see value only in literary texts rather than seeing the importance of this everyday language to the younger generation. Social networking sites such as Facebook have changed our perceptions of the purpose of written language; it has crossed the boundaries between public and private and created a new public arena for informal written conversation. This article examines the literature surrounding this new media and how these new forms of communication can be used in the teaching of critical literacy. The case study was undertaken with a year 12 English Pathways class as a way of demonstrating knowledge of language conventions and how these can be utilised, changed, adapted and perverted in order to create new meaning. The findings from this study indicate that students were able to interpret, analyse and evaluate this social communication in a way that allowed them to reach their own conclusions. This article was not a study on the specific value of Facebook, but more on how social networks are gaining popularity and how social communication has value to us as a way of representing the voice of the younger generation. The findings from the study indicate the level of power that social networks have and the necessity for educators to use pedagogy that is socially aware and technology inclusive.

Introduction

Literacy and English teachers have long taught literacy in various forms using a range of social texts as representations of our culture and society (De Castell & Luke, 1986; Kaplan, 1995; Tuman, 1992; Snyder, Jevons, Henderson, Gabbott & Beale 2011; Warschauer, 1999). Why then do we as educators hesitate to use social networks as a way of teaching critical literacy? There are strong and often contentious views about the value of social networks and a growing fear that these social spaces are degrading our language (Postman, 1992; Roszak, 1994). Social networks are in fact intriguing places and spaces for language development and experimentation which can be used as interesting teaching tools to assist students to understand the functions and practices used in both formal and informal language (Douglas, 2009). Jan Connelly from Hong Kong Baptist University recognises that these "new social practices" represent a "digital literacy-scape that could have a powerful influence over young people's learning" (Connelly, 2011, pg 21). Regardless of your own perception of the value of Facebook there can be no doubt that students are using this as one of their main modes of communication and as such should not be ignored. Instead, students should be aware of the appropriate place and space for this mode of communication and examine the conventions and features as a way of understanding the social world.

Understanding social networking

The world of social communication has changed drastically; during the 80's and 90's young people talked face to face or called each other on the phone, communication was generally one to one verbal communication (Bruner, 1972; Warschauer, 1999). Halliday (1993), Kaplan (1995) and McLuhan (1962) all agree that the growth of social networks have created a social revolution where communication changed; instead of private verbal communication being favoured there was a shift to written on-line methods of communication. Communication became a techno-social activity where conversations were no longer personal or private but instead became an open method of social networking.

In the past, the main mode of communication has been speech; however, with the growth of technologies from the printing press to computers, the rise of the internet and the emergence of social networking, we have seen a shift to more permanent written forms of communication (Bruner, 1972). The trade off for this was that written forms of communication were much less interactive than speech; speech was classed as a much more personal mode of communication as it was designed for direct contact; whereas, the written word was designed for a more public forum (Bruner, 1972). This is still the case today; however, with the growth of social networking we see a shift in the purposes of written communication. Instead of writing remaining formal and for public consumption, we see social networking sites such as Facebook becoming informal modes of written communication, very different from even the generation before.

This text based informal interaction brings into focus the main purposes of language; to communicate and interpret experience by organising it into meaningful patterns (Halliday, 1993). The good and the bad of this new written communication is that despite it being informal casual conversation it has become open to the public. Casual language previously used by young people the generation before was private, used as part of the social and cultural colour of the generation. With the growth of social networks the colour and flavour of generational slang and other unconventional language codes have become public. Some say that this has lead to a degradation of our culture and the culture of the younger generation (Stoll, 1995; Talbott, 1995). Others say that this is merely a representation of the culture and social understandings of this technologised generation (Bolter, 1991; Lanham, 1993). One thing however is clear, this is the language of younger people and they are using this, as their main mode of informal public and private communication (Moyle, 2010).

Young people use social networks as an informal form of communication in the same way as spoken language had previously been used. The major difference is that spoken communication is fluid and non-permanent; however, the written word is not (Hamad, 1991). Once recorded the written communication is "transmitted, stored, archived, re-evaluated, edited, and re-written" (Warschauer, 1999, pg 6). Much more importantly, is that this communication is also copied, replicated and regenerated making this informal generational social "chat," much more than just a replacement for face to face verbal interaction. It has become THE mode of communication for this generation, it is as my generation would say "cool" and so as such other young people copy, replicate and add to this language mode extending and growing this text based language. Whether we agree that this mode of communication is degrading our language base into the future has become irrelevant, as educators we have no choice but to recognise it for what it is, a new subset or branch of our cultural and social language (Douglas, 2009). In the same way that slang changes our social and cultural setting from generation to generation, this text based language does the same thing. The difference is that this is a written mode of communication and so is much more permanent. Once written it exists not only for the people who were its original recipients but for the masses, such is the nature of online social networking (Hamad, 1991). As such, we see it as much more influential on others. On social networks these changed language modes or slang, were originally shared only between friends but now, this has become a new language, one that requires decoding and understanding in order to participate within the conversation. This language is almost a separate language on its own with no known country or place of origin, it is the language of the generation, one that other generations either need to accept in order to participate in, or ignore and run the risk of being left out of conversations with people from other younger generations. In understanding the critical literacies involved in social networking it is essential to have an understanding of what makes these methods of communication attractive, valuable and popular. As such, social networks such as Facebook become interesting arenas for critical decoding and understanding.

Teaching literacy today

The teaching of critical literacy has changed to incorporate the growth of technology and mass media (Moyle, 2010; Snyder, 2000). The development of technologies and mass media has seen a rise in the exploration and sharing of the social world, social networks like Facebook and Twitter are designed as collaborative spaces for open or shared communication (ACMA, 2009). While people can still communicate privately most communication using these social modes are for public view (ACMA, 2009). What makes these spaces for communication so interesting for English and literacy teachers is that they are filled with such rich meanings, with layers of social and cultural understandings which can generate a variety of interpretations and understandings about society.

It is the openness of this communication which demands that English Teachers assist young people to explore, decode and interpret not only others communications but their own. Many young people use social networks as their main form of communication with friends and peers and as such they should have a deep understanding of all aspects of this communication. Critical literacy of social networks is designed to raise young people's ability to make critical and informed decisions of the communications they encounter both as text producers and text analysts (Douglas, 2009). It is essential that young people are able to understand the complexity of the language rich world of social communication that they inhabit.

The teaching of critical literacy centres on students developing the knowledge, skills and dispositions to interpret and use language for communicating and participating in the world around them (Haughey, 2001; Snyder, 2000). To young people today, the major form of communication is Facebook or similar social networking sites, as such, it is impossible for English teachers to ignore this essential mode of communication for young people. As teachers we often make the judgement that these communications have no real value, they are just young people sharing thoughts with no importance outside of information giving and receiving, the only perceived worthiness of this communication is to the participants themselves (Stoll, 1995; Talbott, 1995). This is a limiting and narrow minded view of the world around us, Facebook and Twitter's growing popularity is testament to the changing nature of social interaction.

As an educator the idea of being literate is combined with a strong desire to teach students to read, write and spell correctly, this includes knowing the correct grammar and punctuation and being able to create a text which is understood by everyone (Frechette, 2002). To be ill-literate was to lack these skills, and to lack the ability to use them correctly. Literacy used to be fairly straight forward, this interpretation and understanding of literacy has changed and no longer is value given solely to literature and literary texts. Literacy is often viewed as neutral and value free, being literate has always been dependent on processes that are deemed valuable in particular societies, culture, and contexts (Warschauer, 1999). Changes to the way we practice literacy has been dependent on the social, economic, political and cultural factors of the time (Bolter, 1991; Cummins & Sayers, 1995). Literacy has always been determined as being the survival skills needed to function in society. Being literate "has always referred to having mastery over the processes by means of which culturally significant information is coded" (De Castell & Luke, 1986, pg. 374). With the growth of technology we see literacy expanding to include the literacies needed for a technologised society (Cummins & Sayers, 1995). Techno-literacy is not merely about being able to make a computer function but also about being able to use it to engage in the world around us.

As language grows and evolves, literacy becomes much more than the literary exploration of texts or the decoding of texts for the purpose of survival in the world. Today being literate is the ability to *read* a range of texts by "analysing, accessing and evaluating communication in a variety of forms" and to be able to *write* texts by "producing messages through personal experience, narrative, and point of view," by being able to read and write young people can become effective members of society (Frechette, 2002, pg. 25; ACARA, 2012). Critical Literacy needs to examine all modes of communication, whether we perceive them to be good or bad, valuable or not, communication after all demonstrates participation in society (Kaplan, 1995). Literacy explores our ability to understand, to investigate how and why a text functions, to examine the effectiveness of a text in conveying opinion, ideas and values and the ability to represent the culture and society of the time and place. All of this can be seen clearly in social networking communications; therefore, it becomes obvious that value needs to be given to ways that a range of communications are delivered including social networking which is one of the main modes of communication between young people (Frechette, 2002).

With this change in cultural and social communication we see also a pedagogical change in the way that educators see literacy. As Masterman suggests the greatest challenge for teachers is to "develop in pupils enough self-confidence and critical maturity to be able to apply critical judgements to media texts which they will encounter in the future" (Masterman, 1985, pg. 24). Masterman's opinion is well worth exploring, how do we as educators assist our young people to critically examine a range of literacies? How do we help them to see into their own communications, to examine their purpose, value and meanings? These perspectives are essential to moving student's forward, to helping them to see the value of their own communications and to examine this interesting and often puzzling new language of our modern social and cultural world.

A case of using Facebook to explore literacy

Prior to using social networks such as Facebook as a mode of critical literacy it is essential to ensure that the students have a working understanding of the language codes used in conventional written communications. Students need to be able to compare and call upon these conventions as a way of assessing and analysing a range of social communications. In the following analysis students needed to have a working knowledge of grammar, punctuation, abbreviations, acronyms, spelling and symbols used in language. This knowledge was used as the basis of the analysis and also to examine the overall value of this type of communication.

This study was undertaken as part of a year 12 English Pathways programme which examined how literacy and language function in the world around us. Students were set the task of discussing online conversations they had been involved with. The central purpose of the discussion was to record a list of typical conversations and communications between young people. These conversations were gathered together and students used these to examine the meaning, purpose and audience of the language of Facebook. Students thought that this would be easy; however, when questioned, it was made clear that students did not necessarily understand the full complexity of even their own communications.

The communication which the students selected was what they perceived to be a typical conversation, the invitation to a party. The communication was recorded on the board as: "Hey loser, U gotta come PRTY! this WKND!?! :) ;) SEE YA THERE!" Students were able to state that this was an invitation to a party this weekend. To them this was a simple mode of communication and

fairly typical of their communication style. Students in this case were able to clearly identify the purpose and intended audience of the text; however, when asked to discuss the author's meaning and intention students really struggled to see beyond the most simplistic understandings. Students saw this communication as a relaxed and friendly mode of communication but when asked to state why this was the case, students were unable to identify specific evidence to support their opinions.

In order to push the students further they were asked to look at the *language* itself; *which words followed normal spelling conventions and which did not? Which were acronyms or abbreviations? What did the abbreviations stand for?* (This included the incorrect ones as well). Once they were able to break the communication into its components they were then challenged to look only at the meaning of the words. *What were the actual words? What did the combination of words actually mean?* They were able to identify the meaning of the individual words but when asked what the meaning of the combined words were they disagreed about the intention, some believed this statement was a request others saw it as an order.

The students were then asked to identify the *mood* of the text; however, they had to be able to prove that this was actually the mood. Overall, students found this challenging as the words themselves were identified as high modality, demanding words rather than the friendly banter they had first assumed. Students found it difficult to reconcile the words to what they believed about the actual communication. The words said, *hey loser you have got to come to the party this weekend*, the words themselves do not indicate friendliness, and in fact they are quite insulting high modality words that issue an order rather than a request. *So how do we then see the communication? Is it really an insulting demand or do we need to look deeper?*

The students were then asked to look at the *emphasis* in the words, *why were they emphasised? What makes them important and worthy of emphasis? Does this change the communication to one of friendliness as they first thought?* In looking at this, student's saw that the communication appeared to become even more demanding as the words capitalised such as party, weekend and see you there, all implied that they were coming to the party and in fact did not even ask for a response; they were not questions, they assumed that the receiver was coming to the party rather than asking them to come. *So what emotions did the words imply? Were they friendly words?* The students stated that, *see you there*, indicates friendliness but when asked how, students were unable to explain their impressions, as the emphasis of these words being capitalised created the impression of the tone being demanding rather than friendly, after all SEE YOU THERE in capitals indicated a high level of emphasis like a shout or order. *So what was actually telling them that this was asking them to the party in a friendly way?*

For this the students were then asked to look at the *symbolic* language features of the communication, such as the *numbers*, *punctuation* and *emoticons. What did they add to the interpretation?* From this students were able to identify that the 2, :) and ;) along with the !?! was telling its receiver that it was a relaxed communication, the 2 was a symbolic representation of the word to, the :) stands for smiling or laughter and ;) is a wink, the !?! implies not only the emphasis of an exclamation but also a question with the use of the question mark. From this, students were able to see that it was in fact the symbols in combination with the words used that gave the impression of friendliness and relaxed communication rather than the words themselves. The symbols in this

text based language were in fact essential for adding the flavour and emotion to the overall communication.

Students were then asked to examine the intention of the participants in the communication. *What is the intention of the text? How do you know? How would the intention change if they did not know this person well? What if there age was different? How would that change the meaning of the text?* After much laughter at the idea that someone my age would communicate like this on Facebook, the students were able to clearly see the layers of meaning that communications like this have. Students were able to identify that the communication was dependent on the participants knowing each other very well. They also concluded that the conversation was age specific and would only work as friendly banter in that specific context with that specific friendly relationship.

The students were able to "read" the selected text; they demonstrated detailed social and cultural understanding of the text studied, they were able to access this language, analyse its purpose and evaluate its value as a mode of communication (Frechette, 2002). As part of the evaluation of the task students were asked to not only identify the language features of the text but to also evaluate the overall value of the communication. The students reached the conclusion that not all communications that are written are valuable and purposeful. The students were able to identify that this communication as an informal communication was successful in its intention and aims; however, they agreed that this communication was ineffective in so far as it's codes were very dependent upon the recipient holding the same language, cultural and social understandings (De Castell & Luke, 1986; Warschauer, 1999). Students were able to recognise that this written form of communication was a replacement for speech and was used in the same way, with the same purpose and tone as normal casual speech. Students then extended this understanding by identifying that this text based language was a very specific language that did not adhere to or follow normal language conventions. It was created not for the purpose of formal communication but to deliberately change language into an informal and almost "secret" generational language to be shared only between people who had an understanding of this language. Students added to this an understanding that people tried to copy and replicate this language and then changed and melded it for their own purposes. The young people, who created this language and also those who added to this did not have to follow the traditional language conventions. It was obvious though, that the language conventions were mostly there, but had been deliberately changed to suit their own purposes. The language and symbols used were designed by young people for young people as a way for young people to "talk" to each other on their own terms rather than by those set by adults. The students identified that this was a language rebellion where language conventions had been deliberately modified for the specific purpose of creating a new language which was their own, removed from and separate too traditional language conventions.

Social networking as a representation of the social world

So, what ultimate conclusions do we get from all this? Communication on Facebook is actually a complex social interaction with layers of rich language, social and cultural understandings. The importance of the communication was not in the words themselves, nor in the symbols, emphasis, emoticons or punctuation but in the combined use of these language components. The correct or incorrect usage of these components was irrelevant as the true value of any communication is to be understood by the recipient and in this effort the communication was successful and meaningful (Warschauer, 1999). This communications success is based solely on the premise that the recipient would understand all of these social and cultural cues and would be able to interpret not only the information in the communication but to also understand the intentions and spirit in which this

communication was delivered. The students were able to clearly see the value in this mode of communication but also learned that this communication was very dependent upon the recipient and creator sharing the same understandings. Communication of this kind would not work for example with someone from a different age group as generational understandings can be different which would mean a different social understanding would be reached from this same information.

As educators we can garner a range of understandings from an exploration like the case above. We can gain a strong insight into the younger generation's communications in a way that previous generations have never been able to (Moyle, 2010). This insight into the culture and social codes of the younger generation has brought about a shift in the way we and the generations to follow see language. As educators, we need to ensure that young people are constantly thinking and evaluating their communications in order to ensure that these methods of informal communication remain in their selected domain. These communications belong only as a part of social networking, they are part of the cyber world that people select to enter, in this space these communications have value, and outside of this space they do not necessarily hold that same value.

An essential part of the teaching of social literacy is to teach not only the place and space for the communication but to also have an understanding of the changes this communication can result in. As Warschauer states and Bolter agrees "our culture is itself a vast writing space, of complex symbolic structures. Just as we write our minds, we can say that we write the culture in which we live. And just as our culture is moving from the printed book to the computer, it is also in the final stages of the transition from a hierarchical social order to what we might call a network culture" (Bolter, 1991; Warschauer, 1999, pg. 13). It is clear from this statement that the world is changing, that boundaries between texts are changing. We are seeing before our eyes newspapers going bankrupt due to the growth of information on the internet, book sales are plummeting in favour of kindle and other computer programs and we are seeing people "publishing" a range of texts on the internet outside of publishing houses.

Conclusion

The social world we live in has changed due to the growth of social networks like Facebook, they have moved informal personal conversations into a public forum, created new language codes and changed our understandings of the ways we communicate. Facebook, therefore becomes a powerful revolutionary tool for the younger generation, it has cut down the boundaries and changed the way we see communication. Students who studied this type of communication were able to clearly see that there are many layers to the written language; they were able to clearly identify formal versus informal and personal versus private communication. The students examined their own understandings about the way our language functions including language conventions, intentions and audience. The students involved were able to see that language is a combination of symbols and codes and it is the way that this works together that makes a text successful or unsuccessful as a mode of communication.

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