

Changing the Language: Using Social Media and Popular Culture to Teach Traditional Literacy Skills

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Abstract

Many of today's students are left disengaged by the direction of their literacy journey once they reach the middle grades, or at times, before they ever leave elementary school. The once enjoyable process of becoming literate becomes a past memory. Students are expected to take their literacy journey into an academic world that often lacks ways of showing them how to translate the skills they learned in the past to extend their knowledge. Although students often understand and use concepts they were taught, it is the selection of the language and the way teachers approach instruction that often causes a disconnect. By changing the language, teachers can address academic slumps beginning as early as 3rd and 4th grade and cultivate stronger student interest in reading and literacy. This purpose of this paper was to describe ways teachers may change the language with a deeper integration of technology.

Keywords: *literacy, technology, social media, popular culture, student engagement*

Introduction

It is urgent that some effort be made to address instructional materials, as well as teaching and learning strategies for middle grades learners. Students are succumbing to the academic slump that often occurs before they enter the middle grades (Chall, 1983, 1996). Once students become comfortable or fluent with their literacy skills, they are often not pushed to strengthen them. Many students are bored, and this is not because this generation of students has changed or is different. Rather, it is because teachers have failed to change and update their teaching practices.

Walsh (2010) stated, "Educational policy and curriculum documents have not yet adapted to changes that have occurred with the

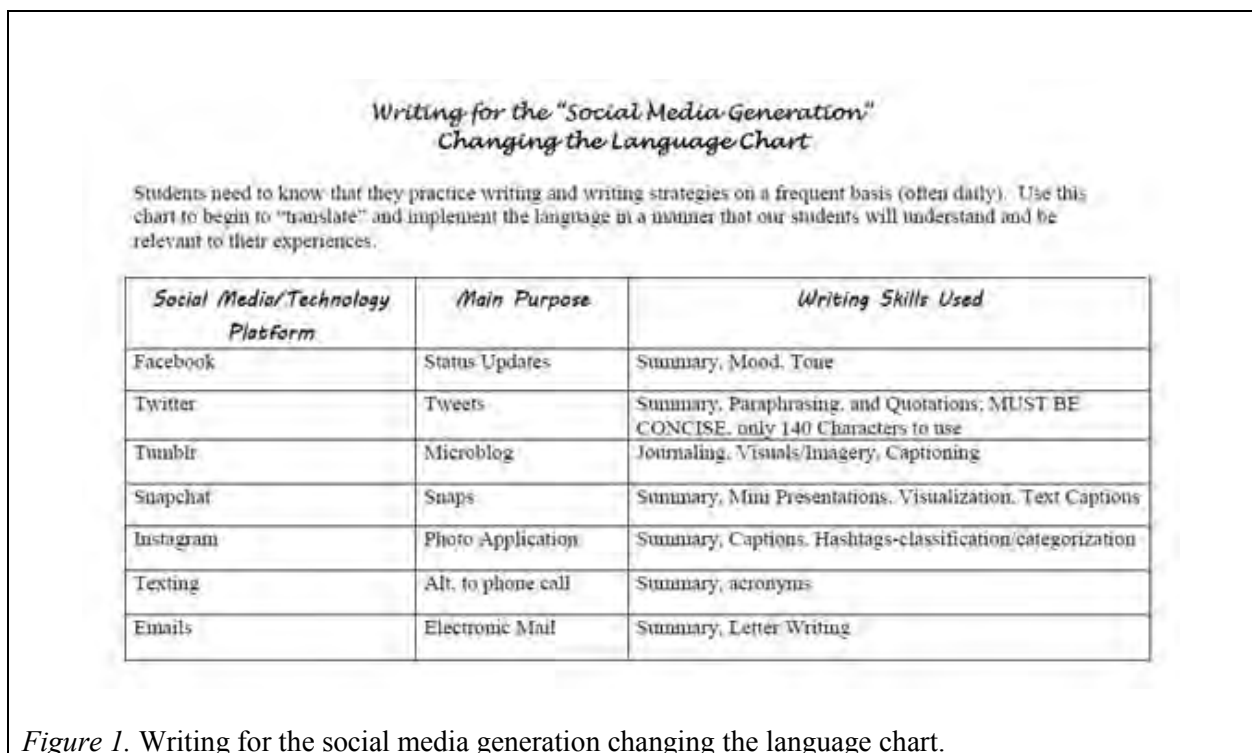
range of digital media that are becoming embedded in people's lives" (p. 212). With such a wide variety of social media and other popular technology trends available for students, teachers must learn how to incorporate rich and interactive technology experiences in the classroom. Many classrooms continue to address literacy with a traditional pedagogy that entails learning basic reading and writing skills using materials associated with a basal reading program. Basal reading program materials expose students to print and digital sources that are designed to strengthen literacy skills and provide a more challenging curriculum as students progress through each grade level. Although basal reading programs provide acceptable resources to support the development, teachers must address literacy from all aspects—listening, speaking, reading,

visuals, and writing. By doing so, students will be exposed to multiliteracies every day.

Multimodal Approaches for Students in a Tech-Savvy Generation

The lack of technology in classrooms requires teachers to be creative and resourceful in their approaches with students. In addition, teachers serve a generation of students who would rather play video games than play outside. As a result, teachers should use multimodal approaches in the classroom to teach

students how to bridge learned skills with technology. For instance, teachers must make an effort to show students that they are reading digitally whether they use a computer, tablet, or smartphone. Similarly, students need to understand that they are writing for different purposes when texting, sending an email, or using social media. Often, students know how to use technology, but they are unable to use it as a learning tool. Thus, teachers must create learning experiences that use several modes of learning and demonstrate how academic and social languages are connected (see Figure 1).



In many classroom settings, teachers encounter a generation of students in which a vast majority have never used a chalkboard or blackboard and have only used interactive whiteboards in the classrooms. Likewise, tablets are often the first book that students read. Students are immersed in technology in their daily lives, so teachers must welcome the

technology culture into their classrooms. For example, teachers may deliver some learning experiences with tablets instead of books, present digital word walls instead of physical ones, and reinforce traditional academic knowledge with terminology that is familiar to students who are of a digital age.

Connecting Academic Language to Popular Social Media Platforms

As of recently, social media and popular culture are often focused on associated negative aspects of communication technologies, such as cyberbullying, the sharing of false information, and online predators. With respect to education, social media and popular culture are forgotten languages and are not used to their full potential. There is a plethora of creative ways to use social media and popular culture to encourage expression through the use many of the literacy skills. With social media platforms, students can follow trending topics, such as social and political movements. Students may then engage in authentic literacy and communication experiences by honing traditional skills, like summarizing, paraphrasing, comparing, contrasting, inferencing, and classification, with the assistance of a technology device.

Due to the popularity of smartphones, approximately 25% of teens are online almost constantly (Lenhart, 2015). The smartphone applications most frequently used by teens between ages 13 to 17 include Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and Twitter. With so many students connected, teachers must work to change their language and find ways to implement the technology culture of their students during classroom instruction.

Facebook

Facebook provides a myriad of ways for students to use literacy skills. Facebook is a social media platform that mixes a mash up of visual and communication tools with a traditional blog. Composing a status update on Facebook provides an individual's followers a summary of their action, thoughts, or emotions. With respect to comprehension instruction, teachers can use Facebook status update to teach students how to identify setting, infer tone, understand pictures, and read captions. These literary elements are frequently used on Facebook, but students may have not yet made

connections between literacy knowledge and skills and Facebook.

Instagram

Another popular social media platform among students is Instagram. Instagram allows users to share photos and video so they may document memories. Instagram is perhaps the simplest technology application that students use because they can solely make a statement by posting a photo online. Captions created on Instagram also provide a means for users to be expressive. Instagram users may also create hashtags to categorize, classify, or link posted photos to topics or genres.

Twitter

Twitter is a social media platform used by approximately 33% of young people (Lenhart, 2015). Originally, Twitter limited users to expressing their thoughts with 140 characters or less in a single tweet. As with many technology and social media tools, Twitter has evolved over the years and increased its allowed character count per tweet and allows users to post photos, link to videos and websites, and create interactive polls. Tweets are dated and time stamped, and users often create hashtags, which are used to categorize tweet. This social media platform draws heavily on the literacy skills of summarizing and paraphrasing, provides immediate access to news, and creates global networks for trending topics.

Snapchat

Snapchat is a social media platform that is targeted towards individuals who want to capture a moment through photos and videos. Snapchat provides users with easy access to quick information because each post is deleted within twenty-four hours. The way in which users can share and engage their audience with Snapchat is captivating. Creative filters, such as touch ups, animals/characters, and facial recognition tools, can be used to modify photos or video. A location feature also gives users

awareness of other cultures and locations near and far. Although Snapchat is meant to primarily communicate using photos and videos, there is the option to communicate by chatting if one so chooses.

Instructional Considerations: How to Change the Language

Common current technology terms need to be brought into the classroom for learning purposes. For example, users may select a mood when updating their status on Facebook. When teaching mood or characterization in the classroom, a teacher could say, “If (insert book character name) were to write a Facebook status update, what would (insert book character name) say? What would their mood be?” Teachers should allow students to see that creating a Facebook status update uses similar concepts and skills for character analysis. Simplifying and merging traditional classroom language with a technology-based language could be just the spark students need to make a connection.

When using Instagram, the goal is to post an attention-grabbing photo with a clever caption. Similarly, students are taught to read by examining the illustrations in a book before learning how sounds, words, and language are connected. Students need to understand that they are writing creatively when they compose Instagram captions using Instagram, as well as concisely. This requires students to play with and manipulate language with acronyms, abbreviations, invented words, and slang. Teachers should provide frequent opportunities for students to practice inferencing and questioning skills associated with captions with both physical texts and Instagram. Teachers should challenge students to read for details when they encounter a caption and determine its importance.

The interactivity that occurs when reading and responding to tweets on Twitter is an ideal way to boost communication skills. Twitter causes even the greatest and most

concise writers to stop and think about what they can squeeze into the limited character count. A tweet must be brief, yet still address all intended points. This restriction often takes a user through a process in which characters and words must be eliminated. For educational purposes, Twitter can be used to teach summarizing, paraphrasing, editing, and inferencing. Twitter also serves as an excellent networking communication tool with which parents, teachers, and students may interact with one another. Twitter’s hashtag feature is a great way to sort tweets by topic and find desired areas of interest. The hashtag feature is also another way for teachers to change the language in the classroom setting, as it could be used to explain genres, themes, and classifications.

Snapchat tells a visual story. This social media platform can be incorporated into classrooms in several ways, particularly as a tool to support the retelling, recalling, or recreating of events that are read or shared with students. Snapchat provides brief text and appealing pictures and video, so it can also be used to illustrate new vocabulary terms or concepts.

Conclusion

Incorporating popular culture into classroom instruction shows students that teachers are able to connect and engage them through preferred methods of learning. It is important to note that changing the language in the classroom is not limited solely to technology and social media platforms. This is only a small portion of how teachers can make learning connections with students. Crawford and Wanless (2016) contended, “Showing children that we see and value all aspects of them—including attributes related to race and culture—is a critical step in helping them feel welcome and connected to their teachers and peers” (p. 9). Individuals who use technology and social media are a part of a shared culture, which is often a culture that is overlooked by teachers but highly valued by students.

Incorporating technology does not mean relying solely on the use technology with students so that all challenges will disappear. Creating a social media account, using associated terminology, and then expecting students to automatically flourish and understand every academic standard is not the intent of changing the language. The traditional aspects of literacy learning are not to be forgotten or devalued. Technology is just one tool that, if used and integrated effectively, can be an instrumental way for teachers to connect with students. Traditional literacy terms and skills should be intertwined with technology-based lessons that integrate and demonstrate the language the students speak today.

Literacy educators will experience success if they can create an environment that

understands and respects the culture of their students in a setting where addressing relevant topics through technology is the norm, not a reward on special occasions. Although there are many negative aspects associated with popular culture, teachers must meet students halfway and learn to transcend and extend learning beyond the walls of the classroom. Changing the language involves a true understanding of who the students are. Teachers must learn what students value and what they need so they may implement strategies that appeal to the diverse learning needs of all students. Educators must learn to modify their language to reflect the culture of their ever-changing student population of students, and this starts with the ability to connect and evolve despite unfamiliarity. As teachers, we must change our language, in order to change their language.

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