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Cyber "Pokes": motivational antidote for developmental college readers

Difficulties characterizing developmental college students are reviewed within the context of motivational theories of learning. The author highlights problems of low self-efficacy and inadequate self-regulated learning for developmental college students. The author argues that the use of Facebook, a widely-used social networking technology, may be helpful in improving low self-efficacy and self-regulated learning by increasing connection with the instructor, increasing social contact with classmates, and providing an opportunity to guide students in their responsible use of Facebook technology. The author outlines instructional techniques that may be utilized with Facebook, such as the instructor creating a profile and facilitating student contact via chat rooms.

More than three decades ago, elementary teacher and educational researcher Kay Haugaad (1973) wondered about the power of comics as a motivational panacea that could be bottled and sprinkled around the classroom as needed (cited in Norton, 2003, p. 140). Haugaad is not alone; many educators share her attraction to the potential pull of students' clandestine literacies (Finders, 1997; Guzzetti & Gamboa, 2004). For secondary educators, recent research examines new literacies such as blogging, IMing (Reed Schallert, Beth, & Woodruff, 2004), and zining (Guzzetti & Gamboa, 2004) that may hold untapped potential for enticing reluctant or struggling adolescent readers. Reed et al. (2004) explained the importance of validating students' out-of-school literacy: "We believe that looking at what adolescents are doing can inform what we want them to do" (p. 252).

Although the motivational literature unequivocally demonstrates the decline in reading engagement from elementary school through middle

school until reaching its nadir in high school (Zuscho & Pintrich, 2001), most government-backed research and resources have been earmarked for investigating elementary reading practices with little attention on adolescents' unique habits. Additionally, while educators have studied factors that help students learn to read, they know less about the factors that keep them reading. Yet as the Alliance for Excellent Education (2006) argued, America's adolescent literacy struggles are equally alarming. The Alliance urged policymakers to invest greater resources into studying and supporting the reading practices of middle and high school students whose reading achievement has stagnated in the last decade. The invisibility of the struggling adolescent reader has produced an increase in the number of high school graduates who are unable to read beyond basic proficiency. In fact, the U.S. Department of Education's (2007) National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), commonly known as the "nation's report card," described several troubling trends among the nation's 12th -grade reading achievement levels. According to NAEP data, the percentages of students performing at or above basic reading proficiency and proficient reading levels have both decreased over the last 13 years. Additionally, only 35% of America's high school seniors performed above basic reading proficiency levels in 2005. The decline in reading scores was evident across all reading contexts, that is, reading for information, reading to perform a task, and reading for literary experience. The study publicized what many teachers in middle schools and high schools already suspected: although secondary students can read and extract basic facts, most are unable to grapple with complex materials.

Ironically, at a time when policymakers and advocacy groups are documenting underprepared adolescent readers, the numbers of college-bound adolescents are growing rapidly. The National Center for Education Statistics (2007) reported a college enrollment record of 17.5 million students for fall 2005 with an expected 13% increase between 2006 and 2015. In response to teaching increasing numbers of underprepared students, most American colleges and universities offer remedial or "developmental" courses aimed at preparing students for the rigors of college work. Attewell, Lavin, Domina, and Levey (2006) estimated that nearly 40% of traditional college students would need to enroll in at least one developmental course in their college careers. When Adelman (1998) studied the graduation rate of those students who needed developmental education in college, he found that the academic success rate for the developmental population was only 39% compared with a 69% success rate for non-developmental students. Attewell et al. (2006) interpreted this discrepancy not as a side effect of enrolling in developmental col-

lege coursework, but as an indicator of poor secondary school academic performance and preparation. Most at risk, according to Adelman, are those students whose deficits are in reading; he warned, "when reading is the core of the problem, the odds of success in college environments are so low that other approaches are called for" (p. 11).

Adelman's (1998) caveat, coupled with the most recent nation's report card (NAEP, 2007), argues that educators must focus their efforts on the unique literacy demands of the contemporary adolescent population, often referred to as the Net Generation. In an attempt to heed this call, Stone (2007) examined teens' online literacy practices in order to find inroads for creating relevant literacy curricula that would prepare adolescents for an increasingly complex and technology-laden world. Her work supported that teachers need to embrace texts that exist on the periphery, like many online literacy practices, that may be crucial for enticing older readers whose motivation to read school-sanctioned literature has dwindled. Specifically, social networking technology need not be the bane of adolescent educators; rather, it may offer insight into existing adolescent literacy behaviors beneficial for educators looking to increase in-school academic literacy practices. With waning reading engagement as a backdrop, the purpose of this article is to examine potential classroom uses of Facebook as a tool for improving academic motivation. School-sanctioned Facebook use may provide the "other approaches" described by Adelman that are needed to better connect developmental college readers with college reading expectations since it offers potential for battling low self-efficacy and poor self-regulation behaviors plaguing many developmental learning students.

Relevant Theoretical Constructs
Self-efficacy
Educational research is replete with evidence suggesting that the more students believe in their abilities to master a task, the more likely they are to succeed. Self-efficacy as a construct relevant to academic motivation is derived from Bandura's (1996) social cognitive framework that explains that achievement works in concert with a person's belief that he or she can succeed at a given task. Indeed, Alvermann (2001) suggested that effective literacy instruction for adolescents must deal directly with issues of student self-efficacy and engagement. When applied to the classroom, research suggests that beliefs of academic self-efficacy are paramount for classroom success. According to Schunk (2003), "those who feel efficacious for learning or performing a task participate more readily, work harder, persist longer when they encounter difficulties, and achieve at a higher level" (p. 161). Although theorists agree that

no construct works in isolation, self-efficacy appears at the top of the motivational hierarchy; that is, without belief in one's ability to succeed, there will be little chance for learning or achievement (Schunk, 2003). Lynch (2006) examined the association between motivational factors and course grades and found support for Schunk's argument. For college freshmen, Lynch found that self-efficacy was the strongest predictor of course grade. Specifically, academic success correlated strongly and positively with self-efficacy scores on the Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (MSLQ). Lynch suggested that faculty help college students become more aware of how their beliefs affect their performance. Similarly, Morrison (1999) administered the College Student Inventory (CSI) to first-time college freshmen to identify characteristics associated with conditionally admitted students (i.e., developmental learning students) that might differentiate them from the total freshman population. She found that on the Academic Confidence Scale, a scale measuring student belief of competent school performance, 75% of the conditionally admitted fell below the mean for the larger population. Like Lynch, Morrison advised educators in developmental programs to provide academic opportunities for successful experiences that would improve the self-efficacy of college students. Finally, Linnenbrink and Pintrich (2003) argued that self-efficacy is not only important, but also it is a key factor in learning and achievement that predicts behavioral, cognitive, and motivational engagement.

Regulation

Along with building students' confidence, educators also must help students understand how to monitor their learning if they want to improve motivation. Any strategy students use to plan and monitor their behavior fits into motivational theorists' constructs of control beliefs. Early theorists examined the concept of locus of control asserting that the more students perceive they have autonomy for their learning, the more successful their educational outcomes (Weiner, 1979). More recently, the work of Pintrich focused on the importance of student control, termed self-regulation, for academic achievement. In his book *Understanding Self-Regulated Learning* (1995), he defined "self-regulated learning [as a construct that] involves the active, goal-directed, self-control of behavior, motivation, and cognition for academic tasks by an individual student" (p. 5). In the college classroom, a self-regulated learner (a) seeks to actively control available resources, such as his or her time, study environment, and use of faculty and student support groups; (b) attempts to control and modify beliefs and goal orientation as required by academic demands; and (c) employs cognitive strategies

for learning, such as deep processing strategies resulting in more thorough learning and performance (Pintrich, 1995). Although researchers have studied the role of self-regulation in upper elementary, middle, and high school (Pintrich & DeGroot, 1990; Wigfield, Guthrie, Tonks, & Perencevich, 2004), few have examined the relationship of self-regulation and academic performance in post-secondary education. When self-regulated learning is assessed in post-secondary samples, similar findings emerge. For example, Morrison (1999) found that 72% of conditionally admitted college students scored below the mean on the Study Habits Scale, a scale designed to measure a student's willingness to make necessary sacrifices to achieve classroom success. Ley and Young (1998) also examined students' self-regulation scores as a possible predictor of developmental status. Using student interview data assessing studying and learning strategies, Ley and Young correctly predicted developmental versus non-developmental placement for 78% of the student sample. Ultimately, the data revealed that the best predictor for classifying students as "regular" admits or developmental admits was the overall number of learning strategies students described using for academic understanding. Van Blerkom and Van Blerkom (2004) found that developmental students used less sophisticated self-motivation strategies when compared to their non-developmental counterparts. Moreover, the authors demonstrated that although developmental students used fewer and less sophisticated strategies in the beginning of the course, their use of these skills improved by the end of the semester. The findings support the notion that self-regulation, like self-efficacy, can be modified.

Finally, the general decline in adolescent motivation documented in the literature is especially problematic for developmental college students who have graduated high school underprepared for higher education. Research with students needing college remediation suggests they are more likely to drop out than their non-developmental peers. To continue to approach literacy instruction as involving print-only texts is to doom them further. Instead, developmental educators must look to new texts and literacy practices that hold promise for scaffolding student success.

Social Networking Technology

Although students placed in developmental reading classes may read at a basic proficiency level, score lower on motivational constructs and utilize fewer study skills, they are not dull or passive learners. On the contrary, the National School Boards Association ([NSBA], 2007) painted a vastly different learner than the one depicted by traditional school assessment

measures. According to the NSBA, adolescents of the Net Generation are "beyond basic communications, many students engage in highly creative activities on social networking sites—and a sizeable proportion of them are adventurous nonconformists who set the pace for their peers" (p. 1). Contrasting data from sanctioned and underground adolescent literacies reinforce advice that in order to prepare adolescents for the challenges of a new millennium, educators must work first to engage students in order to scaffold their potential (Learning Point Associates, 2007). Social networking sites, virtual online locations where users create profiles to connect to other users, already engage incredible numbers of adolescents. According to the NSBA (2007) survey, 96% of students with online access reported using social networking technologies, and those online generally spent 9 hours per week chatting, text messaging, blogging, and visiting online communities. Perhaps even more surprising, the study found that 60% of social network users talked about schoolwork while online. Among college students with online access, Facebook reigns supreme across social networking sites reporting pervasive use among adolescents. Facebook's homepage describes the site as "a social utility that connects people with friends and others who work, study and live around them." The site allows users to create profiles, post photos, send virtual gifts, and communicate with fellow students, friends, and family. Currently, Facebook reports 47 million users with 200,000 new registers per day; it is the sixth most trafficked Web site and enjoys use by 85% of U.S. universities (*About Facebook, 2007*). Clearly, Facebook is not a passing trend but is becoming ubiquitous. Given its unbelievable growth, educators must "explore ways in which they could use social networking for educational purposes" (NSBA, 2007, p. 1).

Two unique aspects of Facebook that seem promising for building student self-efficacy are its outreach potential for teachers and its appeal to a majority of current adolescents (NSBA, 2007). Although changing the self-efficacy of students placed in a developmental college reading course can be difficult because the placement reinforces ideas gained in high school that students are poor readers, teachers are instrumental in modifying features of the classroom that may bolster students' confidence (Schunk, 2003; Zuscho & Pintrich, 2002). Brophy (2004) asserted that students' levels of self-efficacy are best modified by mastery experiences that they feel responsible for. Teachers looking to support their students' self-efficacy should encourage students to set specific, attainable goals, model effective learning strategies, provide encouraging feedback, and make attribution statements that help them connect their efforts with their growth. Schunk (2003) also points to modeling as a positive step for developing self-efficacious students. Teacher and

peer models instill confidence in observers that if a sequence of actions is followed, success is likely.

Facebook may be able to address self-efficacy needs in unique student-centered avenues. Teachers and class members may use the "superlatives" or "virtual gifts" button to recognize student achievement in a public, private, or anonymous display. For example, I sent the first student to master assigned vocabulary a "congratulations balloon" that was displayed on his "gift wall." Another option is sending students class-specific "superlatives" that recognize their growth and provide encouraging support. The group feature also allows the instructor or class members to post study suggestions, supplemental reading material in a class-wide, opt-in format that is less formal and intimidating than university-sanctioned WebCT/Blackboard platforms.

Along with providing positive affirmation crucial for building self-efficacious students, social networking technology may also be used to modify classroom features. Because self-efficacy relies on students' perceptions that they can accomplish a task (Zuscho & Pintrich, 2001), teachers in a developmental reading class must connect quickly with their students to allay fears of impending failure. From this perspective, a teacher's personal Facebook profile may begin supporting students before class begins. For example, teachers' personal Facebook profiles may have important implications for the self-efficacy levels experienced by their students. Additionally, students' feelings of "connectedness" may be increased via Facebook activities that foster the creation of a classroom of students who accept and support each other.

For example, Mazer, Murphy, and Simonds' (2007) important study of teachers' Facebook disclosure on 133 undergraduates suggested the site might entice students by communicating concern and an openness to learn about them. The authors' hypotheses that participants who viewed the Facebook entry of a teacher would experience higher motivation for the class, higher levels of affective learning, and a more positive classroom climate were all supported. The majority of students who viewed a teacher with high-to-medium self-disclosure commented positively about the teacher and her teaching strengths. For example, the authors reported sample student responses such as, "She seemed like she would relate well to her students and make the classroom atmosphere enjoyable" (p. 11). The authors concluded by suggesting that a teacher's disclosure on Facebook "may lead students to higher levels of anticipated motivation and affective learning and lend to a more comfortable classroom climate" (p. 12).

In a similar study, Scheirier's (2006) Facebook experiment yielded results that support the importance of the teacher's interest in establish-

ing student self-efficacy. A biology professor at Northeastern University, Scheirier used Facebook to enter the students' world and show his interest in their educational experience. He discovered Facebook was faster than either Blackboard or campus email at reaching his students, and he reported that the type of communication he was able to have through Facebook was more personal than afforded by the conventional classroom. Student messages posted on his wall illustrated the change: "Hey Dr. Dan this was an awesome idea for your students. I'm looking forward to the rest of the semester—oh and NIN is amazing! I'm stoked to see them on your list of favorite bands" (cited from podcast, Scheirier, 2006). Scheirier's findings echo other motivational researchers such as Dillon (1989), Alvermann (2001), and Schunk (2003) who noted that teachers build students' self-confidence when they care about them as individuals; thus, a teacher's Facebook profile may function as a pedagogical tool for communicating interest and concern in student learning in an arena where students are the "experts."

While teachers' use of Facebook may communicate a desire to work with adolescents, student Facebook activity also may be instrumental in helping students feel accepted and supported. Researchers have suggested that classroom belonging and support were paramount for higher levels of expectancies for success (Goodenow, 1993). Adolescents may use Facebook as a means for building peer support in a variety of ways. For example, Facebook creates a sense of community almost instantly by allowing users to join groups, which allows for regular student participation. After receiving the class roster, teachers might "poke" class members requesting that they join the class group. In an opt-in format, students may provide photos and mini profiles to begin connecting and building a learning community before the first class meeting. Once class has begun, students may move into the facilitator's role where they pose questions around class topics, develop project teams, and provide each other with academic and social support. Educators attempting to motivate adolescent readers cannot overlook the role of peers. Indeed, Eccles, Wigfield, and Schiefele (1998) found that academic peer-support was a crucial part of the learning process for adolescents, especially through modeling specific learning strategies. Students placed in a developmental reading class may be in particular need for peer connections as they enter the class at-risk for failure and worried about their ability to succeed. Virtual class rosters and group meetings via Facebook might soothe anxieties by providing an online support group of learners who care about the students' success.

Another promising aspect of social networking technology is its ability to offer autonomy and reinforce self-regulated learning strategies.

In motivational research, students who felt a sense of control over how they achieved a goal ultimately became more engaged students (Pintrich, 1995). The group feature of Facebook renders it especially helpful in empowering students to take responsibility for their own learning goals. Either the teacher or a student can create a class group on Facebook. For example, I might create a group called "Campbell's Monday Readers"; the group can be open for anyone to join, it can be restricted so that users must be invited to join, or it can be secret so only invited posters are privy to its content. In this arena, the class can continue beyond the 4 hours of designated meeting time. Members can insert hyperlinks that might be useful to the class or simply post questions they had from class lecture or assigned reading assignments. Scheirier (2006) reported using Facebook to create groups from his large lecture-style biology classes, and within 24 hours of creating the class groups, all but 3 of 100-plus students had joined. Scheirier used the class group to post notes and links for help, while students used the "wall" feature to ask questions and request clarification. One of his students reported, "I use Facebook to ask fellow classmates for homework assignments or lab reports that are due" (cited from podcast, Scheirier, 2006).

Scheirier's (2006) student replies were similar to the students surveyed by Berg, Berquam, and Christoph (2007). When asked how campuses might use Facebook, students had several suggestions particularly applicable to a developmental reading class. Students surveyed thought an "Amazon.com" approach for classroom strategies would be helpful. For example, "if you need more practice with inference items, click on these links." Respondents also suggested an opt-in class discussion around relevant topics that would be useful for reaching out to students who were struggling with new material but not likely to ask for help. Schreiber discussed this function as being especially helpful in a large class where students were reticent to ask questions during class and unlikely to request individual meetings with the professor. Additionally, students requested a "poke an expert" feature that could pair struggling students with a more confident classmate. Finally, students reported wanting important tests or due date reminders posted to the class wall.

Ultimately, underprepared students need multiple opportunities to become self-regulators. Student-centered and student-driven classrooms and assignments require students to become more responsible for their learning and, ultimately, create better-prepared students (Pintrich, 1995). Unlike WebCT or Blackboard type platforms, Facebook is student-friendly, student-centered, and student-controlled; the social nature of Facebook invites participation instead of mandating it. According to Berg, Berquam, and Christoph (2007), teachers already know "students use

the internet to find resources, to locate answers, and to validate ideas through others" (p. 42); as educators, we must embrace these existing strengths and help students see their out-of-school literacies as bridges for improving their weaker in-school literacy practices.

Although Facebook may provide opportunities for teachers to communicate with their students and offer students increased autonomy over their learning, its potential for unprotected access to personal information prevents many educators from exploring it. Yet, according to Facebook's numbers alone, America's adolescents are already participating. University of North Carolina doctoral student and Facebook researcher, Fred Stutzman (2006) explained, "you can't fight numbers like this. More importantly, you can't ignore them" ("How university administrators," 2006). Facebook's unique risks, then, best justify its school-sanctioned inclusion. In fact, NSBA (2007) asserted that schools should be trying to teach students how to be safe and how to behave in an online environment, yet the lessons cannot be fully understood unless students are actually using social networking technology. Stutzman's blog offers the following sage advice to university professors and administrators:

The fact of the matter is that students need to understand the long view, and they need to understand the importance of the written record. They have spent their entire lives online, and they are completely comfortable posting information about themselves online. Now that they're 18, economic motivations step in, and it is our obligation and duty to protect them. Telling them not to *say anything controversial*, or forcing them to use privacy settings just won't cut it—remember, the students who are on the Facebook *want* to be found and listened to. What they need to understand is the context. They have to understand the need to *act now on behalf of the person they'll be in 4 or 5 or 6 years*. Give them that context. Explain to them the value of maintaining a self-image they can be proud of down the road. Work with them on this, not against them--it may be your only chance. (Stutzman, 2006).

Although students have been enthusiastically involved with Facebook nearly from its inception, clearly, they are not always aware of the potential dangers for their futures. As adolescent educators, we must scaffold their critical eye and show them the importance of savvy online use. Bridging their online behavior with their life-long goals aids students who are developing as effective self-regulators. For example, students could defend in a role-playing situation their justification for not selecting a candidate for a bank manager's position whose Facebook profile demonstrated or referenced excessive drug use. Similarly, teachers could ask students to assume the position of the PTA president sitting on the search committee for a new first grade teacher. Along with equally im-

pressive resumes, the three candidates all have Facebook profiles from their undergraduate institutions that the committee has been able to find on the internet. After viewing Facebook profiles as a possible employer, students own warnings might echo those of Skiba (2007) who offered the following social networking caveats: Posting something stupid now may haunt a student later, even files that are removed can be cached on some search engines; and writing or posting is not a university freedom granted without consequences to students.

Finally, online adolescent literacy presents a unique opportunity that can no longer be marginalized or ignored if educators hope to engage the Net Generation. As Scheirier (2006) explained to his colleagues, through social networking sites, teachers have an opportunity to enter the students' world. It is a chance, he suggested, to show interest and establish a meaningful connection. Developmental learning students, like their non-developmental counterparts, are already on Facebook; the issue becomes will educators venture into cyberspace to bridge students' out-of-school literacy strengths with the literacy skills they will need?

Limitations

Although Facebook enjoys nearly ubiquitous use among college students, it is not widely accepted in the academic realm, and empirical evidence of its use in the classroom is scarce. Moreover, as an adolescent-fueled phenomenon, many educators are reticent to use Facebook. Some shun the chaotic online world of today's college students; some fear privacy infringement lawsuits, while others view Facebook as too distant from educational goals. Additionally, many instructors feel they already reach out to the Net Generation with Blackboard or WebCT; however, university-owned platforms do not provide the social-based, student-owned atmosphere many college students crave. Despite these qualms, Facebook is a considerable aspect of today's college experience.

Implications for Further Study

The implications from several U.S. Department of Education studies (2007) sounded alarm bells: our increasingly global world promises to marginalize those who cannot decipher and analyze increasingly complex literacy. Unfortunately, many educators and even many students argue that social networking is, at best, a diversion, and at worst, corrupting the literacy practices of adolescents. Yet as Moje (in press) expressed, "youth literacies should matter to researchers and teachers because they matter so much to youth" (p. 1). Emphasis, she continued, should focus on understanding adolescent literacy practices so that educators might cull from what teens know and love to inform teachers about

what they have yet to conquer. Students love Facebook, and as many studying the phenomenon have remarked, even if Facebook disappears, something else will take its place. As educators and researchers we can mock or simply ignore social networking technology, or, as Charnigo and Barnett-Ellis (2007) suggested, "by exploring popular new types of internet services such as Facebook instead of quickly dismissing them as irrelevant, we might learn new ways to reach out and communicate better with a larger segment" (p. 31). The poor college graduation rates of struggling adolescent readers suggests that developmental readers deserve this "poke"—it may be their last one.

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