Online Discussion Forums in the Classroom: Can the Principles of Social Media Benefit Literacy and Enhance Engagement with Learning?

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ABSTRACT

The prevalence of digital technology and the capacity to connect and communicate via social media platforms are profoundly affecting the way in which people interact and think about text. There is global fascination with blogging and sharing of personal information, even down to the digital publication of mundane or random twitter topics. Screen, (touchpad phones, laptop devices or other) has become a dominant form of communication and teens are highly adept at interpreting non-linear and non-sequential reading paths. They also want to participate in, rather than just consume media and its contents. Digital tools provide this capacity and virtual communities offer new ‘spaces’ for youth to seek belonging, craft identity, and respond to stimuli.

Most of these sharing platforms are generated via ‘membership’ of a virtual community and have implications for the formation of social relationships, the nature of groups and balance of power. Significantly, they impact on the very fabric of how we work together. For educationalists, these significant shifts in society’s approach to communication and information present both challenges and opportunities. In particular, there has been much speculation and interest regarding the effective merger of social media into the curriculum. (Gee, 2011, p. 9, Carrington and Robinson, 2009, Carroll, 2011, p. 27) This paper describes some key professional reflections and outcomes of a pedagogical journey to blend ‘social media engagement’ patterns with conventional classroom activities in the Middle Years.

Context

Teen years are widely acknowledged as a time when disenchantment with formal education can occur. Many educationalists have thus advocated the implementation of rich, authentic, world-connected teaching and learning activities. (Culican, Milburn and Oakley, in Molyneux and Godinho, 2011.) Interacting with members of an online discussion forum to collaborate and construct knowledge is one means of providing teens with this very opportunity. This is because online discussion forums leverage on contemporary knowledge and familiarity with digital communication platforms such as Facebook, Flickr and Myspace.

Learning Management Systems (LMS) have facilitated the creation of online discussion communities in the delivery of distance education for many years. (Palloff and Pratt, 2007.) Yet it is only more recently, with the surge in popularity of digital social networking that secondary school educators have become acutely aware of the benefits and opportunities in
harnessing this type of ‘space’ to complement conventional face-to-face learning and teaching. (Crocket, Jukes, Churches, 2011.) Accordingly, in 2012, teachers at The Southport School decided to integrate social media strategies in Middle Years English classrooms to meet this techno-communication phenomena and ‘connectivity’ expectations of their ‘digital teens’.

The goal was not only to provide an interactive learning environment, however, but also to enhance multi-literacy skills and cognitive development. It was hypothesised that through blending online learning with conventional classroom pedagogy, teachers could further enhance students’ written communication skills. They could also facilitate meaningful learning dialogue between students and provide time and space for thoughtful and critical thinking responses to develop.

The online dialogue that ensued ranged in variety from reviewing films, poetry and literature to practicing spellings and grammatical structures. A work-in-progress paper observing some outcomes of this pedagogy was discussed in a joint presentation at the English Teachers Association of Queensland (ETAQ) Conference, Brisbane in July 2012. This paper further expands how social media was used in a blended classroom environment to benefit literacy and enhance engagement with learning.

The Topics – Spellings, Shakespeare and documentary reviews
One teacher used the online forums to practise extension vocabulary and spellings. Students were asked, during actual class time, to create sentences online with a list of words. The teacher explained that she tried to write online as if she was ‘talking’ directly to the students; relaxed, but professional (Figure 1). She also explained that she deliberately used inclusive language techniques in writing comments to create a sense of community within the forum.

The students were encouraged to participate even if they did not know every word on the list. She explained in her online ‘post’ to her class, that responding with a question mark or even a ‘wrong’ answer was quite acceptable. This persuaded more reticent students to ‘have a go’ and write for a wider audience online.

This teacher reflected that comprehending and learning spellings also involved understanding how the words could not be used. Thus, she explained that allowing the students to make mistakes with vocabulary, or letting them concede that they needed more help, was a useful strategy in developing literacy awareness. Inserted below are teacher and student examples from one of the spelling activities during a session with a grade 10 English class.

The sentences that students made in response to the spelling words were generally creative, often funny and a result of a collaborative effort. Many students worked in pairs during the lesson to create a list of responses. A key outcome of this activity was that the students collaborated to make meaning with new words and appeared to enjoy this online ‘social’ aspect of creating and posting sentences for peers to view.

Following the online written activity, the teacher discussed the student’s sentences in a face-to-face whole class approach. She commended all contributions. Importantly, after the
lesson ended, the online lists of student spelling, not only remained visible, but were also capable of being edited. In other words, the learning and teaching aspect of this class did not finish just because ‘the bell rang’.

As a follow up to this class activity, the teacher posted a list of accurate definitions for homework. In subsequent weeks, the same teacher also uploaded pictures to connect meanings for unfamiliar vocabulary with visual cues. This online strategy greatly benefitted the diversity within the classroom.

From spellings to Shakespeare, online forums provided a valuable platform for dialogue, social interaction and meaning making. In the Romeo and Juliet unit of work, students compared and contrasted film techniques, discussed Shakespearian terms and observed key traits about the characters and symbolism in the play. Forum knowledge became collective, dynamic and student directed in response to curriculum defined material. Students began to actively look for ‘updates’ to English class posts in a similar way that they might check a Facebook site. Teachers were aware of this phenomena not only because of student verbal feedback, but also because of an in-built software capacity to ‘track’ online engagement. The benefits of this feature are discussed later.

The final term in the year for grade 10 English, focused on documentary productions. The forums generated opportunities for students to take a critical look at media and how students were also motivated to critically evaluate existing films and make online suggestions for new ones.

Some benefits of online discussion forums
Online discussion forums offer numerous advantages for both teacher and students. For the ‘tech-savvy’ teens, who are generally eager to navigate and take more control over their learning environment, discussion forums provide a wider platform to exchange information and ideas. For the teacher, they offer a flexible platform from which to educate in a participatory culture. This participatory culture is one that involves multiple communication directions within which students and teachers can interact and create new knowledge. (Figure 4) This environment also contrasts with the traditional linear-based interaction pattern (Figure 5) that has typically defined the relationship between student and teacher and educational constructs.
Facilitating multiple routes of communication in education, via a digital conduit, such as those offered by online discussion forums, is both innovative and empowering. Online forums allow the student to connect with a wide audience when they post written work. This is in comparison to them sensing that the purpose of school work is just to gain teacher ‘approval’. Online forums therefore provide a greater purpose to the development of writing and reading skills. They facilitate an environment that allows peer review to occur. They also contribute to fine-tuning critical thinking and the development of meta-cognitive skills.

Digital discussion forums provide participants with time to reflect and respond to questions and comments. Importantly, the forums allow students to work at a pace suitable to their individual learning needs. This can be particularly helpful in building the confidence and engagement of more introverted students in the classroom. For the teachers at The Southport School, watching the unfolding development of student confidence and interest, as they wrote for and received feedback from peers, was professionally most rewarding.

The implementation of digital tools contributed to further discussion about how and where students are encouraged to write. Reflections on this issue were unanimous. It was agreed that whether the tools be traditional ones – pen and notebook – or new, digital approaches to communicating, it is the principle of encouraging students to write to communicate that continues to be a significant and fundamental step in the teaching of literacy. As English literature professor and philosopher Walter J. Ong explained in his influential 1982 study *Orality and Literacy*, the ability to write is ‘utterly invaluable and indeed essential for the realisation of fuller, interior, human potentials … writing heightens consciousness.’ (Ong in Carr, 2011. p. 57)
Boys, literacy and leadership – determined to succeed
At The Southport School staff were not only interested in implementing electronic pedagogy because it complemented the contemporary teen mindset and communication patterns. An underpinning focus at this school is developing teaching and learning strategies that engage and support the literacy development of adolescent boys. Since inception in 1901, The Southport School has been all boys educational environment. Accordingly, teachers concentrate in crafting curriculum around boys’ interests and ensuring that activities boys value are predominant in pedagogy.

An extensive body of professional literature exists that explores the issues of boys, literacy, school achievements and gender specific pedagogy. In the literature review, Gender and Education (2009) Zygier points out that a simple Amazon title search will produce over 100 publications; Google entries present over 54,000 ‘boys education’ websites and Google Scholar provides over 2,000 academic articles pertaining to the boys, literacy and the school debate. (Zygier in Lloyd, 2011.)

Lessons at The Southport School are therefore typically goal-orientated, focusing on immediate experiences with specific relevance to boys lives. They offer choice, with tasks often structured to allow for active, rather than passive involvement. They also support boys as individuals within a social setting and importantly encourage the development of communication abilities. They recognise the need to employ innovative methods to encourage reading and support literacy development. From the outset, therefore, instigating online discussion forums as a pedagogical tool to suit the cognitive and social needs of the boys was a significant and valuable one.

Blending online forums and face-to-face teaching – professional reflections
Three class teachers, covering grades 8–10 in the English department, were involved in the process of blending online discussion forums with face-to-face teaching. Each teacher managed the tool in slightly different ways, some using it for formative work and others, utilising it to design short summative assessment pieces. All three teachers agreed that blending social media strategies into the physical classroom provided an innovative platform that catered to a diverse range of learners and contributed to interactivity and a participatory culture.

Staff reflections also covered issues of autonomy and control that online discussion forums provided students. Teachers reflected that students had time to construct and even edit their responses to questions and comments online. Students were able to re-examine material, sometimes even weeks after brainstorming in the physical class had finished. The forums were thus seen as a useful tool for exam revision, as well as a tool to extend cognitive, creative and critical thinking.

Notably, one of the overriding aspects of using online forums was the ability of teachers and students alike to access material via the ‘click of a button’. For teachers, this ease of access to materials provided greater opportunity to share classroom productivity and demonstrate student interaction with lessons and curriculum content. The forums were a valuable way in which to identify students who were either challenged or able to be extended by certain areas in the curriculum. Certainly, the platform provided a transparency of data for further professional development and reflection.

Students also provided feedback on their experience of using online discussion forums. A common response was that they liked the ease and convenience of using a electronic format. One grade 10 boy explained, ‘I read the forum “threads” whilst in mum’s car on the way to training’. Another boy answered that he liked to ‘post’ responses to homework online.
using his i-phone. ‘It’s so easy to keep up with work this way’. In a grade 9 class, a student explained that he liked the personalised nature of the course. ‘Even after class finishes, we can leave a message for our teacher online. Sometimes other people (classmates) answer the question we leave, but that is okay too because we are helping each other learn.’ Most notably, some students highlighted that even if they were away from school sick, the online forums allowed them to feel involved and up to date with their English work.

**Ability to track participation**

Another key feature of the online discussion forums was the ability to ‘track’ student participation. This feature demonstrated how many times the students had logged on and viewed the online class discussion. It also highlighted how long the student had studied the material. From a teacher’s perspective, the ability to know that students were logging on and participating was helpful. Teachers discussed the advantages of using this tool as an early intervention strategy for students that were falling behind with school work. Figure 6 features one student’s participation logs.

![Figure 6](image.png)

The software records the time and date that the student logged online and which pages he visited. This is useful for understanding more about the student’s study patterns.

Whilst seemingly ‘Orwellian’, the ability for teachers to monitor interaction with the subject matter and written responses actually appeared to enhance student commitment to their studies. The students were interested to know that the teacher was aware of the time they spent trying to understand the work and revise. The tracking feature appeared to motivate, rather than alienate students from the online community. In the main, many of the students genuinely wanted to practise writing on the forums, develop their ‘online voice’ and see what their peers were thinking in relation to their comments.

It should be noted that observations in this report are made with a limited control group. Nevertheless, the fact that online discussion forums parallel constructs within the already accepted teenage social networks, suggests that this mode of communication is a viable one to connect and engage with teens and perceptions of their world.

Following this report there were various questions from conference participants. Queries regarding the motivation of students online, the scaffolding in forums and time commitment required for teachers are addressed below.

1. **Questions regarding motivation**

One of the first questions posed at the ETAQ Conference related to motivation. Delegates wanted to know how teachers motivated students to log on and contribute to the online forums.
In response, it was explained that with the grade 8 cohort a summative assessment piece was included in the course design. With grade 9 and 10, however, the forums were only used for formative work. Pedagogy involved referring to the online forum environment whilst delivering lessons in the traditional face-to-face manner. It also involved modelling and teaching students the importance of providing positive written communication to peers. This strategy re-affirmed the construction of a new literacy reality for the students; that online contributions such as these, not only develop cognitive abilities and produce educational gain, but also contribute to a wider understanding of how online communication is used in a professional, real-life setting. This further consolidates the relevance of digital technology in the classroom for teens.

Grade 8 students were assessed on the quality of their online comments. They were given time to edit their post before being assessed on the grammatical correctness of their written communication. They were also assessed on how well they responded to peer comments. An excerpt from one student using these techniques is included below. (Figure 7) It is significant that the student connects with the content and demonstrates his ability to critically evaluate and communicate. This construction of online dialogue between the students then provided stimulus for further teaching and learning in the physical class room.

A transcript of the above post: ‘I believe when Mr. Winter stated that horror is an emotion not a genre, he meant that when you watch a horror film you feel chills done (down) your spine you feel scared, horrified and intrigued. I believe what Mr. Winter said was correct and the way he said it is true, but I do believe horror is a genre. Horror films are a type of film When you speak of Comedy you do not say I want to watch a horror movie. You say I want to watch a comedy movie. Horror is the exact same you don’t say I want to watch a horror movie that will scare me, you say I want to watch a horror movie. In conclusion I believe that horror is both a genre and emotion. Do you agree or disagree with what I have said?

As well as that I believe that William has put forward a very interesting way of thinking of this.’

2. How to start a forum
Another line of questioning that was raised by participants at the ETAQ Conference involved how to start a forum. Specifically, delegates wanted to know, what kind of questions were posed to initiate group discussion?

It was suggested that to commence involvement from students within a fledging group, ‘ice-breaker’ exercises were fundamental. Some teachers explained that they had provided links to funny stories in the news or uploaded digital pictures to draw an immediate personal response from participants. One teacher, however, elaborated further on an ‘e-ice breaker’ exercise she used before starting the novel study, *The Bridge to Wiseman’s Cove* in May 2012. (Moloney, J. 1996)
She explained that the students were asked to respond online, in class time, with their first impressions to a trending news story. The story involved the revenge of a dentist in Poland who had extracted all of her boyfriend’s teeth due to his infidelity. (Lemire, J. 2012.) This news article connected with themes that either warranted empathy or condemnation from the students. In reviewing the written responses online, it was clear to see that students felt comfortable in providing ‘first impressions’ about the story. In a similar way to posting on Facebook or Twitter, students were quick to cast opinion. There was even active appraisal of other classmates’ ‘posts’. This type of non-threatening ‘e-ice breaker’ helped members of the group put ‘fingers to work’ on keyboards. It also helped build confidence, supporting the teacher’s endeavours to construct an online class community.

Scaffolding from this initial forum participation, the same teacher created a subsequent thread of questions which ‘nudged’ the students towards addressing specific themes in the novel. She asked the students to click on a hyperlink connected to pictures of 10 amazing bridges and reply to the following questions:

1. Which bridge was most appealing to you?
2. Have you crossed an unusual bridge with family or friends?
3. Figuratively speaking, what do you think the word ‘bridge’ symbolises?

Students responded quickly to this activity, providing detailed information about bridges that they had crossed. They shared their interest in the history or engineering of specific bridges and knowledge of song lyrics about bridges. Again, the information that was being sourced from the students in these early posts was not so much about content-orientated goals, but rather about developing social connection and a safe environment within which to learn. This point is critical also because it illustrates how students can construct a written bank of collaborative knowledge and understanding from their experiences.

With the online discussion forums, a new model of learning and teaching is emerging. Students have the power to calibrate and develop their knowledge and understanding via an interactive framework. It is within this framework that teamwork and shared goals become powerful forces in the learning process of the 21st century. It is also within this structure that online discussion forums provide a valuable platform to generate open-ended questions and encourage the constructive exchange of ideas and opinions. Online discussion forums provide students with the ability to take greater responsibility for their own learning development. They also provide a platform within which the foundations of constructivist education can thrive and develop. (Jonassen, 1998, p. 3)

3. Commitment to online discussion forums

Finally, attendees at the workshop wanted to know what kind of time commitment was involved from teaching staff. In response, The Southport School teachers explained that online forums were like developing any other type of community. They required ‘teacher presence’ and active involvement.

It was explained that facilitators have to be seen as ‘present’ online to encourage the growth of this ‘pop-up cyber community’. Forums that reported early failure during the year also demonstrated relatively low activity of the facilitator. The Southport School staff explained that it cannot be assumed that students will be intrinsically motivated to interact with an instant digital community. Teachers have to provide a ‘visible’ presence online to nurture their community.

Yet at the same time, cognisant of teaching loads, it was explained that forums can be integrated as part of the class delivery. They can also be used to deliver homework exercises
and, (fortunately), in an online forum environment, homework does not get ‘lost’. Written comments by the teacher can be posted to all students. This creates a more effective and transparent means of delivering feedback. Furthermore, as the online forum develops, cyber-discussions that hold the potential for further intellectual and educational gain can be encouraged between participants. This kind of encouragement supports discovery-based learning and enhances the critical thinking abilities of students.

**The next steps in blended learning classrooms**

Importantly, The Southport staff explained that social media should not be used in isolation, or seen as an ‘add-on’, but rather ‘blended’ into the teaching and learning sphere. They emphasised that it was important to build trust and create a safe online environment, in which everyone feels comfortable and confident to contribute.

Asked about the ‘next steps’ in the digital pedagogical journey at The Southport School, teachers explained that more innovative strategies are planned to help students proactively engage in a world that increasingly demands proficiency in multi-media literacies. Already there have been discussions about inviting other members of staff to ‘guest blog’ on certain forums. There has also been discussion as to how the forums will complement further trending educational strategies; specifically, ‘The Flipped Classroom’ was mentioned. This type of discussion and professional planning lends itself to developing additional self-directed and differentiated learning tasks for students. Overall, therefore, it can be observed that the 2012 experience was viewed as a constructive one, paving the way for the ongoing implementation of blended pedagogy, that supports diversity and connection within The Southport School community and with real-life experiences.

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