Voices from the Field:

Using Collaborative Writing Tools for Literary Analysis: Twitter, Fan Fiction and *The Crucible* in the Secondary English Classroom

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Introduction

As educational researchers, media theorists, and sociologists are defining the constellations of practices that constitute "literacy" in a new social, digital, and participatory culture (Jenkins et al. 2009; NAMLE 2009; Alvermann 2008), teachers are faced with the challenge of preparing students for success with these new literacy practices while still meeting the accountability demands of NCLB-era schooling systems (Beach, Campano, Edmiston, and Borgmann 2009). What *kinds* of reading and writing assignments will prepare learners to engage with the vast range of knowledge-building and problem-solving communities that increasingly characterize the educational, vocational, and social experiences of many adults? What can we do to bridge the gap between these new literacies and kinds of practices that students are called upon to demonstrate in formal and standardized assessments?

Over the last two years, a research group made up of students and faculty affiliated with Indiana University's Learning Sciences Program, secondary English teachers working in several high schools in Southeast Indiana, and administrators at those schools has developed and refined an approach to literacy instruction that embraces an expanded notion of literacy and supports engagement in new media literacy practices while also helping learners to be successful in the English classroom. This paper summarizes one unit that makes use of the microblogging tool Twitter, fan fiction practices, and the crafting of a traditional literary analysis essay. These are embedded in collaborative and multimodal practices in ways that encourage students to treat texts as living and personally and socially relevant artifacts. This embedding is achieved by organizing participation in these activities in support of the following learning objectives:

1. Ability to write about and talk about characters and characterization in sophisticated ways
2. Ability to identify and negotiate norms of written participation in a range of technology-driven communities.

We are continuing to develop this unit, and are now expanding our scope to consider how to help other teachers to fully implement it or to modify it to make it their own. We believe the early lessons we've learned implementing the unit in a rural secondary school in Southeast Indiana are instructive for other researchers and practitioners interested in incorporating new technologies and literacy practices into the classroom.

Justification

Efforts to integrate more varied literacy activities into the secondary language arts classroom likely need little justification; nor is justification needed to support an argument for personally meaningful engagement with literary works.[1] The challenge faced by many educators, however, is in developing pedagogical approaches that

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[1] But for more on this issue, see Morrell (2002), Moje et al. (2008), Peppler & Kafai (2007), Gee's (2007) work on video games, learning, and literacy, and Christensen's (2009) effort to re-imagine the literacy classroom as an ideal site for "teaching for joy and justice."

can be personally engaging and socially meaningful while still meeting the accountability challenges of a testing system that continues to treat literacy as a set of discrete skills that can be measured without regard to context (Beach, Campano, Edmiston, and Borgmann 2009, 15).

Our project, then, was to develop an approach to literacy instruction in general and literary analysis in particular that made possible classroom engagement with key literary practices such as character, plot, and setting analysis; that offered activities that felt meaningful and important for our networked students; and that opened up opportunities to reflect both on approaches to formal literary analysis activities and on the range of writing-based practices that increasingly comprise the lives of young people engaging with a range of online and offline friendship-based or interest-driven communities (Ito et al. 2009; Sefton-Green 2004). We hoped to help address the participation gap (Jenkins et al. 2009) that limits some learners' access to and success with new technologies and literacy practices. Importantly, we sought to accomplish these diverse goals in ways that also lead to student success in school and that increase achievement on standardized language arts tests (as elaborated in Hickey, Honeyford, Clinton, and McWilliams 2010).

We chose to work with the microblogging platform Twitter for this project, both despite and because of adolescents' limited participation in Twitter (Lenhart et al. 2010). In part, we chose to work with Twitter to emphasize to students that literacy practices for the 21st century involve the production and interpretation of an array of texts, including print and non-print materials, as articulated in the second of the NAMLE Core Principles (2007). Using Twitter, we believed, would engage students in digital media practices and would invite their critical, collaborative participation in the process of transforming a textual world into a dynamic online community. In so doing, we believed that students would engage in the "active inquiry and critical thinking," embodied in the first standard of the NAMLE Core Principles. Literacy in the 21st Century is comprised of more than traditional reading and writing skills. Additionally, we chose to work with the concept of fan fiction because of the ways in which literary analysis and character analysis (two staples of the English classroom) get taken up in specific ways and through a range of media tools and platforms to meet the needs and goals of communities of 21st-Century creative writers.

Students we worked with were generally familiar with the notion of 'tweeting,' though few had Twitter accounts of their own; likewise, only a few students had written fan fiction outside of the classroom. This made it possible to approach the platform from an outsider's perspective. In asking students to explore the norms and conventions of these communities, we hoped to help them articulate the rules and norms that drive their participation in other text-based contexts as well.

A Description of the Unit

It is important to note that this unit is not reliant on the tools or specific communities identified within it: though it *uses* Twitter, it is not *about* Twitter; though it *incorporates* fan fiction practices, it is not *about* 'doing' fan fiction. We found these tools convenient and useful because of the research group's expertise with these environments; other tools that make possible the practices identified below may be used with as much success.

This unit is not about Twitter, but it *is* about developing creative strategies for working within the constraint of 140 characters per post. The unit is also about perspective-taking as a means of engaging in the more traditional literacy practice of character analysis. It is about inhabiting a text and the characters within it, and about considering how to best represent a character's thoughts and personality in a medium very different from the one inhabited by the character. It is also about approaching a literary text as a fan might, by nitpicking, speculating, and appropriating source material for building new creative works. Finally, this unit is about the crucial role of literacy communities—communities of readers and writers working together to build knowledge and solve problems. Twitter communities and fan fiction groups are two that we felt exemplified these points effectively.

This unit works with Arthur Miller's play *The Crucible*. We chose this text because it is commonly taught in secondary literacy classrooms, and because our collaborating teacher identified this text as challenging to teach because students struggle to see the relevance of the 17th-Century Salem Witchcraft trials to their lives today. Thus, a primary goal of this unit was to emphasize the enduring relevance of the themes of the play (these themes include religious persecution, mass hysteria, and manipulation of public sentiment for personal or political gains). Though the unit was designed to meet the specific challenges of

working with *The Crucible*, other literary works that introduce a large number of characters and work with highly dramatic scenes may be substituted with success.

Space concerns make it impossible to describe this unit's activities in full. Below, we outline key activities; a fuller overview of this unit will be made available online at http://working.dev.deeplocal.com/frontend/project/32

1. **Considering characters and characterization through microblogging**. As noted above, the general popularity of Twitter, paired with students' relative unfamiliarity with the platform, made it an ideal tool for exploring spoken and unspoken norms. This tool also offered the opportunity for students to use reader response approaches to explore characterization, to inhabit the textual universe of the play, and to challenge students to address issues of tone, style, and characterization as they tweeted in character.

In this activity, students were assigned to take the part of one or more characters from the play, both to read parts aloud in class and to tweet as their assigned characters during in-class reading of the play. Students developed Twitter usernames and profile photos, and they were encouraged to tweet in the tone and language of their assigned characters. In the beginning, we helped students identify key moments that might lead a character to respond via Twitter; later in the unit, students took over this responsibility as they began to see the role that this backchanneling tool could play. The screenshot below was taken from the class Twitter feed during a courtroom scene in *The Crucible*.

Figure 1

MaWa4 ⓐ i will be gone every day now Proctor...why dont u understand that we do weighty work. #eg
Monday, September 27, 2010 8:59:55 AM via web

ElProctor ⓐ Sarah Good is pregnant, the womans near to sixty, are they mad? #eg2
Monday, September 27, 2010 8:58:58 AM via web

AbiW2 ⓐ #eg2 I have to go to court everyday for the trials.
Monday, September 27, 2010 8:58:39 AM via web

SaGo4 ⓐ #eg2 Let me say my commandments
Thursday, September 23, 2010 9:46:59 AM via web

AnnP4 ⓐ #eg2 Aye Hang them!
Thursday, September 23, 2010 9:46:43 AM via web

ThoPut4 ⓐ hang the witches #eg2
Thursday, September 23, 2010 9:46:33 AM via web from Indian Creek, IN

BePa4 ⓐ make sure you get them all!! #eg2
Thursday, September 23, 2010 9:45:10 AM via web

SusWa4 ⓐ the lieing continues #eg2
Thursday, September 23, 2010 9:44:44 AM via web

Mele4 ⓐ hang dem stupid witches!!!!! #eg2
Thursday, September 23, 2010 9:43:40 AM via web

GilesC4 ⓐ Definition of AMELIORATE....To make better, to improve; to heal; to solve a problem #eg2
Thursday, September 23, 2010 9:41:11 AM via web

2. **Appropriation of source material for the writing of fan fiction**. Fan fiction—creative work that appropriates features of books, televisions shows, or films to extend, alter, or add to the original narrative—offers an opportunity to explore socially motivated participation in activities such as close reading, character analysis, and the ethics of appropriation.[2] Fan fiction communities are known for their deep engagement with and close reading of source material; —practices that align closely with the goals of many Language Arts teachers. They therefore offer an opportunity to support learners' development of traditional literary analysis skills while engaging with a technology-supported writing community. Jenkins (2007) groups fan practices into four broad categories: speculating; nitpicking; cataloging and collecting; and appropriation and transformation.

In this activity, students discussed examples of fan fiction focusing on characters from *The Crucible* (available at http://fanfiction.net), and drafted their own short speculative fiction that extends or reimagines a portion of the play. In drafting these stories, students were encouraged to use the characterization guidelines established by fan fiction communities; these guidelines are fairly closely aligned with the approaches to characterization and character analysis that are dominant in many English classrooms.[3]

3. **Beta reading**. According to the popular fan site FanFiction.net, "A beta reader (or betareader, or beta) is a person who reads a work of fiction with a critical eye, with the aim of improving grammar, spelling, characterization, and general style of a story prior to its release to the general public." Beta readers identify their strengths and weaknesses as reviewers, and they build their reputation and credibility in the community by accumulating a history of providing timely and helpful feedback to writers (Black 2010).

We used the betareading concept to have students develop beta reading profiles (see fig. 2, sample betareading profile from the Fan Fiction site fanfiction.net), designed to help them reflect on their proficiencies and to connect with writers in the classroom whose own self-identified strengths and weaknesses differed.

[2] The practices common to fan fiction communities have been taken up outside of fan communities, as well. Of particular relevance to this audience may be recent work by Penuel, Riel, Krause and Frank (2009), Halverson (2003), and Spillane (2006) on online teacher professional communities.

[3] Though there is not space here, a more thorough consideration is warranted of the tensions inherent in introducing out-of-school, informal practices into the formal, compulsory setting of the high school English classroom. For more on this issue, see Alvermann (2008), Beach and O'Brien (2008), Sefton-Green (2003) and Yardi (2008).

Figure 2: Sample betareading profile from FanFiction.net

4. **Literary analysis essay**. A significant challenge for educators who integrate new technologies and new literacy practices into their classrooms is offering evidence that doing so can help students develop the literacy skills vital to academic success as well as to proficiency in new media literacies skills. We hypothesized that the activities listed above could lead to an increase in students' ability to engage in character analysis activities and to use close reading techniques to develop an analytical approach to a text While more work needs to be done in this area, we have found early evidence that this approach can have these effects. It is possible, for example, that students' resolve to successfully embody their characters and appropriate textual evidence to support their characterizations in their tweets is providing them with a tangible and enticing enough purpose for reading that it is guiding their efforts to make sense of the text.

5. **Aligned classroom assessments**. This module builds on insights from a prior project that aligned embedded reflections with conventional classroom assessments (Hickey, Honeyford, Clinton, and McWilliams 2010). Prompts were embedded into the context of the activities that were designed to foster discourse around the key ideas of the text. These were aligned with conventional "curriculum-oriented" classroom assessments, which were used to ensure that the discourse around the enactment of the activities and the reflections were indeed leaving every student with enduring understanding of both the text and the targeted language arts concepts.

6. **Discreet testing of achievement impact**. One of the features of the underlying assessment model is discreetly administering "standards-oriented" achievement measures before and after the curriculum. This can provide evidence that convinces skeptics and critics that these innovations still help schools accomplish high-stakes accountability targets. But these can also provide a stable indicator of increased learning in the unit from one implementation to the next, even if major changes are made to the module. (Hickey et al. 2006). To this end, a reading comprehension test was created using 21 released state test items that were aligned with the targeted reading comprehension standards but independent of the curriculum. These items asked about characters in excerpts that were like the ones that students were likely to encounter on their graduation test (*A Room of One's Own* by Virginia Woolf and Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*). To protect the validity of the scores, the research team discreetly administered the test: students were not instructed to study or prepare for the test, the teacher was not shown the items, and the design team did not target any of the items in the curriculum. Analysis of the scores before and after the curriculum showed that that improvement in the scores was statistically significant ($p < .05$). This provides valid evidence that even in this initial implementation, this innovation was helping address school accountability goals.

Themes

In the two implementation cycles for this unit, the general curriculum design principles that we started with were made more specific as we tried out different features of the several activities. These specific principles are now being further refined and will be shared along with the more refined activities. In the meantime, three new themes emerged in this work that were new to the group and that we believe other innovators will find useful and interesting.

1. **Motivation to participate increases when everybody's participation is essential**. The interest-driven and friendship-driven communities that characterize young people's informal learning activities often feature active and highly motivated participants (Ito et al. 2009). This is often due, in part, to participants' perception that their contribution both matters to and is valued by other community members (Jenkins et al. 2009; Shirky 2008). We hoped to build a similar perception in the activities described above and found this particularly successful during the microblogging activity: students steadily increased in their abilities to tweet "in character"—or in a style and tone that was appropriate for their assigned characters. As students began to interact as their characters with other characters through Twitter, all students' participation became essential to the activity. For example, during a crucial moment in the play, a student playing a key character neglected to tweet when the character was attacked by another character. The students paused in reading and turned to look at the student. "Don't you think," one student said, "you would have something to say about that?"

2. **New approaches to assessment can help students demonstrate what they've learned through (and beyond) the development of creative artifacts**. Much of the writing included in this unit is social and collaborative, just as it is in many online writing-based communities. This raises the question, broached by many assessment researchers and practitioners, of how to assess individual students' participation.[3] We addressed this challenge by using collaborative writing not as an assessable object but as a tool for students to articulate their own developing understanding of key themes from the unit. Rather than directly assessing student's draft character analysis essays, we aim to have teacher assess students' reflection on that artifact as evidence that they understand the nuances of the practices of characterization.

3. **The teacher's role cannot be underestimated**. A teacher does not need to be an expert Twitter user or fan fiction writer herself in order to bring these types of activities into the classroom, but she does need to be able to provide both organizing and thematic support. Many of the websites we have used to complete this activity were blocked by school Internet filters, and teachers were strong and, ultimately, successful advocates for having these sites temporarily or permanently opened to their students. When administrators or parents expressed concerns about students participating in online communities, the teachers' ability to explain the pedagogical purpose of using these tools had a significant impact on these people's attitudes. The same was true for students who had either never used a microblogging service or who were not interested in writing speculative fiction.

Additionally, the teacher's role in facilitating the activities described above is not to be an expert not in the tools and activities themselves but in connecting these activities thematically to each other and to the big ideas of the unit. While traditional classroom discussion is predominantly text-and teacher-centered, this unit invites student participation and extends beyond rote recall and recitation of texts noted in studies of literature classrooms. The teacher is essential to building participation structures that enable learners to engage with new tools and ideas with a playful and curious attitude and to regularly reflect on the learning that can result.

Future work

This unit is part of a larger assessment project funded by the MacArthur Foundation's Digital Media and Learning Initiative; the purpose of this work is to develop new approaches to assessment for the 21st Century classroom. Work related to both formative classroom assessment and standards-based formal assessments is ongoing. Additional examples and student data from this unit are forthcoming.

One larger aim of this project is to provide evidence that instructional approaches that incorporate social and collaborative learning opportunities can support not only individual gains in core content and literacy practices but also aggregate gains on formal and standardized assessments. This unit is part of a multi-year project researching these issues, and early results will be made available through the MacArthur Foundation's Worked Example Project.

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[3] This issue has been addressed by far too many researchers and practitioners to mention them all here. Some recent work that has influenced our thinking on assessment include Bledsoe's (2009) discussion of collaborative digital writing; Wilson's (2006) discussion of the role of rubrics in classroom assessment; and Beach, Clemens, and Jamsen's (2009)discussion of using and assessing students' work with digital tools.

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