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2010

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Recommended Citation
Jane Fife, "Using Facebook to Teach Rhetorical Analysis." Pedagogy. 10.3 (2010): 555-62.

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Using Facebook to Teach Rhetorical Analysis

Jane Mathison Fife

The attraction of Facebook is a puzzle to many people over the age of thirty five, and that includes most college faculty. Yet students confess to spending significant amounts of time on Facebook, sometimes hours a day. If you teach in a computer classroom, you have probably observed students using Facebook when you walk in the room. Literacy practices that fall outside the realm of traditional academic writing, like Facebook, can easily be seen as a threat to print literacy by teachers, especially when they sneak into the classroom uninvited as students check their Facebook profiles instead of participating in class discussions and activities. This common reaction reflects James King and David O'Brien's (2002: 42) characterization of the dichotomy teachers often perceive between school and nonschool literacy activities (although they are not referring to Facebook specifically): "From teachers' perspectives, all of these presumably pleasurable experiences with multimedia detract from students' engagement with their real work. Within the classroom economy technology work is time off task; it is classified as a sort of leisure recreational activity." This dichotomy can be broken down, though; students' enthusiasm for and immersion in these nonacademic literacies can be used to complement their learning of critical inquiry and traditional academic concepts like rhetorical analysis. Although they read these texts daily, they are often unaware of the sophisticated rhetorical analysis they employ while browsing others' profiles (or as they decide what to add to or delete from their own page). Engaging students in a rhetorical analysis of Facebook can take advantage of this high- interest area — where most students are already rhetorically

savvy but unaware of their critical processes — to teach the often challenging skill of rhetorical analysis.

Effectively Framing Facebook for Critique

It can be tricky to bring Facebook or any other popular literacy into the classroom as an object of critique without seeming to frame it as a lowbrow object of intellectual contempt. When critique is focused on popular culture in the classroom, Frank Farmer (1998: 204) has noted "the perception among students that cultural critique is a privileged, elitist mode of inquiry, one that is largely indifferent to, if not contemptuous of, those it presumably seeks to enlighten or liberate." Since sites like Facebook and MySpace are frequently cast as dangerous technologies in the media, students often expect a similarly negative stance when social networking sites are discussed in the classroom. I explain to my class that our goal is not to evaluate Facebook as a good or bad communication tool but to look at the rhetorical strategies that inform how people use Facebook to communicate with others.

When we begin discussing Facebook, many students see it as a transparent tool and not likely to be interesting. But as we dig more deeply into how people use Facebook by reading some recent essays, students are less willing to take Facebook at "face value." Some critiques pique their interest more than others. Christine Rosen (2007) argues that Facebook is more about creating status by amassing large numbers of friends than about connecting with genuine friends. My students did acknowledge that while some people use Facebook this way, most of the users they know are more selective about whom they friend. Many students were quick to respond to the complaint expressed by Brent Schendler (2007) that he just did not "get" Facebook with comments along these lines: *These articles were written by older adults so they don't really understand*. While some students dismissed all the articles as the opinions of out- of- touch old folks, others focused on insights that struck them as accurate descriptions of Facebook's functions. They endorsed Joel Stein's characterization of Facebook as a "platform for self- branding" (2007).

And after Schendler (2007: 66) expresses his inability to "get" Facebook, he describes how his twenty- something daughters explain why it is useful to them: as an "antidote to homesickness" because it helps "preserve that special intimacy that comes only from knowing every twist and turn in the lives of her best friends" and as a "tool for procrastination." My students agreed that these uses were important for them as well. Once we shifted the inquiry from observations by oldsters who did not understand to observations that resonated with their Facebook experiences, students were ready for deeper analysis.

Modifying the Tools of Rhetorical Analysis to Fit Facebook

One student expressed skepticism about the very possibility of analyzing Facebook profiles rhetorically because he said he had Googled an essay about Facebook and rhetorical analysis, and it claimed that traditional rhetorical analysis techniques did not apply to Facebook. I told him I agreed that Facebook profiles were indeed very different kinds of texts from traditional essays, and that was exactly why we were about to spend a class meeting looking at how features in Facebook profiles communicated to readers. Jamerson Magwood (n.d.), the author of the essay my student read, maintains that traditional facets of rhetorical analysis (he chiefly mentions ethos, pathos, logos, and the canons of invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery) do not work when applied to Facebook profiles because "there is no argument." Magwood writes that profiles are not arguments: "Each account is an individual representation of someone else's view, but not an affirmed point on a given argument. The accounts do not really establish a thesis or intend to prove a point, which does not work with traditional rhetorical standards." He also suggests that the lack of transitions is a problem in analyzing arrangement, while the template nature of the documents makes it hard to analyze style because the profiles all look similar.

My students and I addressed Magwood's critiques as we talked about Aristotle's concepts of logos, ethos, and pathos and how we could find these appeals within the features of Facebook profiles. A much more recent text than Aristotle's helped my students see how nontraditional collage- like texts could still employ rhetorical tactics to get their messages to an audience: Rebekah Nathan's *My Freshman*

Year (2005). Nathan, an anthropology professor, wrote this monograph after a year of participant observation in her own university (which she calls Any U) when she enrolled as a freshman, submitting only her high school transcript without mentioning her subsequent graduate work. She lived in the dorms and went to classes, posing as a returning student, in order to find out more about college life than she was able to do as a professor observing classroom interactions. I read to the class the section of Nathan's chapter (23 – 27) on dorm life in which she analyzes dorm doors to discover the tacit rules that govern their design/production. I asked them to consider how much they think Nathan's analysis applies to the doors they have seen and how it is applicable to a reading of Facebook profiles. Nathan's description (verbal only, no pictures included) of dorm doors and the codes they reveal for what goes on and what is left off is a very helpful and accessible introduction to rhetorical analysis of a text that is highly visual and collage based and is limited in its print content, and in that print content favors borrowed quotations and witticisms over lengthy discussions and explanations. Nathan also describes a rhetoric of exaggeration and extremism (well understood by students), supporting the general idea of fun and spontaneity. Much of this rhetoric of door composition applies to Facebook profiles. The rhetorical goals of identity disclosure and a bit of exhibitionism parallel the Facebook textual dynamic nicely. Even the writing of personal messages on the "wall" in Facebook is like the message boards most people put on their doors. As with dorm doors, students can readily claim that the representation of self on Facebook pages is often exaggerated and tongue in cheek.

We talked about how traditional rhetorical concepts like logos, ethos, and pathos shift when applied to new media texts. Colin Lankshear and Michele Knoble (2007: 9) argue that "new literacies involve different '*ethos* stuff ' from that which is typically associated with conventional literacies" because "new literacies are more 'participatory,' 'collaborative,' and 'distributed' in nature than conventional literacies." In terms of Facebook, this collaborative quality would include comments written on a person's wall or applications (like pokes, zombie bites, or Harry Potter spells) sent to a

person. By the end of that day's meeting we had pulled together a fairly extensive list of Facebook features that students thought were rhetorically significant. These features included quantity and type of pictures (in profiles and albums), people's comments on walls, applications (what and how many), the "about me" and "personal info" sections (how much and tone), standard profile information, and groups. Students observed that even apparently small features like the status (a statement of what the person is doing or feeling: "John is" and a blank to fill in) can offer telling information about the person's attempts to affect an audience. Silly or "random" statements might make the person appear clever or witty, while a straightforward statement like "Becky is lonely" could prompt an invitation from a dorm neighbor to come and hang out. Since Facebook profiles are representations of the self, most features that can be seen as appeals to logos or pathos also have a strong reflection on the writer's ethos. Even comments written by someone else on one's wall gain a tacit endorsement by the profile owner if they are left instead of deleted.

Critical Insights from Rhetorical Readings of Facebook

My students, many of whom had initially said that Facebook was not very interesting to analyze because it is just a straightforward communication tool, had different responses once they began their projects. Learning from my students' insights has complicated the way I look at Facebook.

Motifs of Partying Are Not Fabricated But Are Not Representative

One phenomenon that interests students is how students' interpretive frame for reading Facebook pages is very different from parents' perspectives. Parents do not understand the trope of exaggeration, almost a parody of the "wild" college life that is at work on many Facebook pages. Students note that when they see a few pictures of drinking, they know that they are generally not representative of someone's life. In other words, these images should not be seen primarily as factual appeals to the intellect. While the photos are real, I assume, partying images are carefully selected moments from a person's experience that trump the more usual boring stuff; descriptions and pictures of more common activities like studying just do not make the cut for most folks. These pictures alone are not

intended as a claim that partying is the main activity in these students' lives, as might appear to be the case when read through a parental lens looking for logos, for straight factual representation. When read as a tongue- in- cheek reference to the college party culture, they are partly an appeal to pathos through humor and an invocation of fun filled, lighthearted values. In contrast, profiles that go beyond this display of a few casual party pictures can depict the writer as a person obsessed with partying or a person trying desperately to seem cool by looking the part of the partier. Instead of just a few party pictures in an album, these cases might include a profile picture of the writer holding a drink along with many other photos of carousing. Similarly, statements about drinking in the person's profile along with conversations on the wall about parties past and future can suggest a person trying very hard to be popular by crafting an image of a party guy or girl.

"Please Like Me" versus "This Is Me"

Students observed that very general responses to items in the "about me" section (for example, someone claiming to like "all types" of music) suggested that the person was trying to be more likeable, to appeal to greater numbers of people instead of revealing specific likes or dislikes that might turn off some readers. They noted that people using what I call the "please like me" rhetorical strategy often included quotations from popular songs or movies on their profiles, attempting to stir positive emotions in the reader by citing commonly liked elements of pop culture. The reader could respond with a positive judgment about the profile writer's ethos when these quotations hit the target on their appeals to pathos. In contrast to the "like me" strategy, some profiles could be said to have a "this is me" approach, describing distinctive tastes in music, listing specific (often less popular) bands and quotations from favorite books or friends instead of tag lines from cult films. These writers veered away from the pathos- heavy appeals to affiliation, using a more logos- driven cataloging of likes to distinguish the writer from others, creating a greater sense of accuracy in the presentation of self. For some students, these specific "this is me" profiles — even though they may not have evoked positive feelings through shared preferences — impressed them favorably

through the honest ethos they created instead of the ethos of schmoozing suggested by the "like me" profiles.

Dependency on Electronic Interaction

While my class was studying Facebook, some server malfunction made it impossible for our campus to access Facebook for an evening. This outage made many students notice the difficulty they had functioning without it. Several students realized how much of their time spent surfing (often avoiding doing schoolwork) was spent on Facebook. My students' experiences were echoed by a commentary published in our school paper describing the difficulties the writer noted during this involuntary Facebook hiatus. In this commentary, David Harten (2007) observed that it "gave us all an interesting perspective into what life might be like if there wasn't such a great social networking Web site to access that can assist some people in completely avoiding having a social life all together." Partly a result of this event, several of my students focused their rhetorical analyses on profile features that might suggest whether someone overuses the site. They noted that features suggesting an overreliance on Facebook might include an excessive number of "friends," many albums of photos, and updates to a person's status and profile information many times a day. In cases like this, the nearly constant additions to the profile resulted in a reader's "get a life" judgment on the writer's ethos.

Digital Autobiographies, Journals, and Memorials

One of my students remarked that Facebook profiles can share extensive information about a person and that for some people it may be the closest they come to writing an autobiography. These constantly changing records can log social activities and encounters of the very active as well as journal like meditations of more reflective students. The pages of autobiographical information — which, according to my students, are often very accurate reflections of a person's ethos — can be used by the curious to extensively investigate a person by electronically befriending them before deciding whether to invest time in a face- to- face friendship. Some students confessed that they sometimes befriended a friend of a friend just because they were nosy

and wanted to find out more about the person, not because they wanted to pursue a genuine friendship.

These profiles that usually reflect the ephemeral concerns of the writer can take on special significance upon the writer's death. Following the recent (unrelated) deaths of several students at my university, their Facebook pages became impromptu memorials as friends added pictures and reminiscences. In cases like these, brief comment exchanges on the wall with friends that occurred before the person's death may lose their logos- driven informative value and become poignant testimonies to the ethos of the deceased — how she was always there for her friends, for example, or managed to find time in her busy schedule to plan service events.

Learning with Our Students

Studying Facebook helps students draw on the tacit skills of rhetorical analysis that they already use to make explicit their awareness of rhetorical concepts. In addition, it helps them to develop a more critical stance toward a popular literacy they encounter regularly and to appreciate its complexity. This assignment has the added benefit of teaching teachers about an important literacy practice of college students that can easily be written off as a waste of time by those outside the social network. Margaret Hagood, Lisa Patel Stevens, and David Reinking (2002: 69) suggest that "the literacies that are embedded in the lives of today's Millennial Generation are substantively and culturally unique. And we argue that they need to be better understood to comprehend and to influence positively literacy development in contemporary society." Even if we do not want to be Facebook users ourselves, as teachers of language we need to keep up with changing digital literacies.

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