

# Social Media in the Writing Classroom and Beyond

BINBIN ZHENG, SOOBIN YIM, AND  
MARK WARSCHAUER

## Framing the Issue

The rapid technological transformation of day-to-day life has necessitated a rethinking of literacy pedagogy. What it means to be literate in the 21st century is being reshaped to include not only traditional literacies, that is, reading and writing in print-based environments, but also the knowledge, skills, and strategies needed for comprehending and communicating via new technologies. Accordingly, the term *multiliteracies* was coined by a team of literacy researchers in the New London Group (1996), referring to the literacies required of students amid the ever-changing landscape of emerging technologies. In addition to emphasizing a broader concept of literacy, multiliteracy addresses the importance of cultural and linguistic diversity and multimodal representations. Similarly, scholars of new literacy studies suggest that, from a socio-cultural perspective, reading and writing is comprised of plural literacies shaped by varying social contexts and cultural identities (Black, 2008).

The notion of multiliteracies can open up new possibilities for second language teaching, especially in the area of writing. With the growing popularity of blogs, wikis, social networking sites, and cloud-based writing tools, L2 writers' digital literacy practices have become more interest-driven, purposeful, interactive, and embedded in authentic contexts. For example, social media facilitates collaborative communication and the creation of multimodal texts, which can easily be shared in online affinity spaces where readers and writers from around the world interact. Writing via social media can provide opportunities for English learners to communicate with native English speakers and practice their written language in authentic and motivating ways.

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## **Making the Case**

### **Social Media and Writing in In-School Environments**

Prior computer-assisted language learning (CALL) studies, primarily conducted at the post-secondary level, have suggested that instructional affordances of social media can facilitate students' exchange of ideas and sharing of knowledge, develop their academic identities as authentic writers, strengthen their awareness of audience and authorship, enhance their confidence in and motivation for writing, and ultimately promote their writing skills and language development (e.g., see discussion in Ware, Kern, & Warschauer, 2016). Writing via social media is potentially especially beneficial for L2 learners because these tools can provide students with communicative opportunities to practice their English writing in authentic and motivating ways. For example, in examining the use of blogs in a university L2 English composition class, Bloch (2007) describes how a Somali immigrant student used blogs to bridge his vernacular spoken English with a more academic form of written English. Writing on the class blog, the student freely and critically voiced his thoughts and reflected on his readings, and interacted with peers in expressing disagreement with their arguments, demonstrating an impressive degree of reflection and thinking in his writing. Bloch's conclusions were further corroborated by Sun and Chang (2012), who argued that as a genre of informal writing, blogging can help L2 learners bridge the gap between their home language and academic English through the process of composing and interacting with peers and teachers. Using a mixed-methods approach, the study by Sun and Chang (2012) examined seven L2 graduate students' interaction and collaboration in a blogging environment. Sun and Chang illustrated how blogging served as a forum for L2 writers to practice different forms of academic writing, to co-construct knowledge about academic writing, to reflect on language learning skills, and to establish a learning community through multiple methods of online social support.

A small body of studies have also examined the use of social media in K–12 contexts and found them to be supportive of the language and literacy development of students, especially English language learners. For example, Zheng's dissertation (2013) examined how online discussion in a microblogging environment was used in fifth grade classrooms to facilitate writing activities among diverse students. Employing a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methodologies such as longitudinal analysis, social network analysis, and content analysis, Zheng's study suggested that students increased their participation in the online writing activities over time, with the most significant growth in participation occurring among English language learners. Students' participation in the online discussion also positively affected their writing test score, increased their language complexity, and generated deeper thinking and higher-level cognitive skills when writing about what they had read. Furthermore, student interactions with teachers and peers became more dynamic and intensive through the blogging activity. This learning community was no longer dominated by the instructor, but over time came to involve students as co-constructors of knowledge. This

aligns with other new literacy research, which suggests that in interactive learning communities, all participants assume the role of both teacher and learner and, as a result, authority should not be seen as unidirectional (Black, 2008); though, as discussed below, teachers still need to play an active instructional role.

### **Social Media and Writing in Out-of-School Environments**

In addition to the potential of social media to support L2 writing instruction in classroom environments, previous CALL studies have revealed that students are actively engaged in a wide range of digital literacy activities in out-of-school settings, such as emailing, chatting, gaming, and publishing. Research conducted in these settings suggests that use of social media can help writers to sharpen their messages in response to comments and feedback from others and develop their identities as authentic writers (e.g., Lam, 2004; Black, 2008). A concrete example of this is Lam's (2004) investigation of two Chinese adolescent immigrants, who struggled in their interactions with English-speaking peers at school, yet were able to develop their English speaking skills and confidence through interacting in English with peers of Chinese descent. Both students constructed their unique online identities as multilingual writers in online discussion communities. Similarly, Black (2008) explored young English learners' participation in fanfiction.net, a public online forum that many adolescents and adults use as a platform to share their fictional writing related to popular books, cartoons, comics, games, or movies. The three English language learners examined in Black's study developed writing and collaboration skills through composing texts in the fanfiction forums and discussing feedback with global audiences. These L2 writers also developed a strong sense of audience and authorship, strengthening their identities as popular multiliterate writers. Both Lam's and Black's studies suggest that online environments can provide opportunities for practicing writing in diverse genres, and enable processes of meaning making and identity development that transcend geographic, linguistic, and cultural boundaries.

In summary, new ways of using social media, both in classrooms and beyond, can potentially increase L2 learners' motivation and engagement in writing, strengthen their awareness of audience and authorship, and promote traditional and new literacy skills. When used in classrooms, these potential benefits do not entirely or even principally flow from the technological tools themselves, but rather rely on teachers' skillful integration of the tools into language teaching tailored to the given needs and contexts.

### **Pedagogical Implications**

Given the growing role of emerging technologies in education, it is essential for educators to understand how to effectively integrate a variety of social media into language classroom instruction. One of the most widely discussed affordances of the use of social media in writing instruction is the apprenticeship of students into

collaborative research and writing discourse communities, which are typical in most professional and academic settings. Wikis, blogs, and cloud-based writing platforms, such as Google Docs, are examples of collaborative writing tools that allow multiple authors to create summaries, brainstorm, and build annotated bibliographies for academic research projects. Considering the increasing preference for utilizing social media to develop collaborative knowledge, conducting group research projects in English for specific purposes (ESP) settings is particularly beneficial. Such projects may help foster L2 students' subject-specific knowledge, as well as broaden their information literacy skills.

In order to facilitate meaningful collaboration, teachers need to carefully design learning tasks that induce diverse phases (e.g., initiation, exploration, negotiation, co-construction stages) and forms (e.g., joint writing or parallel writing) of collaboration, in which authors share varying responsibilities and make contributions together. Furthermore, meaningful collaboration is also dependent on the clarity of a project's goals and guidelines for collaboration, and the sufficiency of training in peer review strategies. As cautioned by previous studies, the potential benefits of collaborative writing through receiving feedback and revisions may be futile for students engaged in the collaborative review process "without the necessary cognitive, metacognitive, and social understanding to make appropriate changes" to their writing in response to feedback (Myhill & Jones, 2007, p. 325). Therefore, instructors ought to consider students' diverse abilities and proficiencies during collaborative group writing practices and adjust their curricular goals to provide appropriate scaffolding.

As social media facilitates interaction among global interlocutors, teachers should provide students with the social and intercultural knowledge necessary to respond appropriately to the differing values, discourses, and practices utilized in diverse linguistic and cultural communities. In the classroom, teachers can encourage students to participate in fanfiction sites or massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs), where multinational participants frequently interact, and lead group discussions or assign research projects about the specific challenges and strategies for effective understanding and communication. This essential training will ultimately help develop students' communication and collaboration skills that are critical in most academic and professional settings, as well as empower students by leveraging their multilingual skills as valuable assets.

Next, students' writing practices with social media can also be used as rich resources for formative assessment. For example, the revision history feature of Google Docs automatically records the time, date, and content of each entry, and tracks feedback histories and consequent follow-ups. Revision histories not only aid teachers in obtaining evidence of group participation, but also serve as important sources for performance assessment as they reveal a holistic picture of developmental writing processes. Teachers can also encourage students to develop their own e-portfolios, in which students collect daily writing activities through social media and record their own reflections on their writing. E-portfolios are useful for helping students to value their out-of-school literacy skills and to promote self-evaluation skills, as well as for enabling teachers to better assess students' challenges in writing and evaluate their writing development over time.

Lastly, it should be noted that a teacher's active role is critical in facilitating writing with social media. Although teacher responsibilities and roles may change as learner autonomy increases, combining teachers' direct instruction with an appropriate level of facilitation is necessary throughout the learning process. For example, Tomberg, Laanpere, Ley, & Normak's (2013) study of teacher control in a blog-based learning environment suggests that even in collaborative learning methods based on constructivist approaches, it is still essential for the teacher to retain control over learning activities to ensure that students benefit from self-directed learning. Instead of being a passive guide-on-the-side, teachers should embrace their multiple roles as co-inquirers, researchers, and instructors during the process of facilitating the socially situated practices of L2 digital literacy.

**SEE ALSO:** CALL (Computer-Assisted Language Learning); Emerging Technologies; Technology for Teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) Writing; Writing as Language Learning

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