SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE CLASSROOM: NEMESIS OR NECESSITY?
Corporate America weighs in

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Social media skills are required by many businesses today, worldwide. The classroom provides a rich opportunity to practice and explore interpersonal communication with technologies used in the business world. Business writing instructors can harness their students' talent with social media and show them how to apply those skills in workplace settings. Business professionals, who are intimately familiar with current business practices, can offer guidance to instructors about the types of social media skills their students are expected to know. By introducing business needs in an academic setting, a relationship is forged that helps create college graduates with more marketable skills and an insight to the inner-workings of the world beyond college. Experts from multinational corporations IBM, Best Buy, McDonald's, and Groupon offer their opinions about the types of social media and interpersonal communication skills they would like to see in college graduates.

Keywords. Social media, Business writing, Online interpersonal skills, Workplace readiness, Social media writing strategies, Teaching social media skills.

As the first half of class comes to a close and you release the students for a break, are you amazed that only a couple of students stir from their chairs? Are you mildly amused when the prayerful congregation sitting in front of you drops their chins to their chests and puts their hands together, cradling tiny electronic devices? Are you slightly envious of the speed in which their thumbs can move, only to be further perplexed with the thought that they are actually composing text at that rate? This ceaseless texting,

emailing and Facebook-checking behavior that occurs in our classroom is worrisome to many, but these same skills are required by numerous businesses today. Teaching students appropriate applications of social media skills will make them more marketable and ultimately, will empower them with interpersonal skills that are appropriate to the communication events encountered in today's business world.

The key for business communication educators is to recognize the students' talent for social media, and harness this common student-based skill. Business professionals, who are familiar with current business practices, can offer guidance to instructors about the types of social media skills their students are expected to know. The classroom provides a rich opportunity to practice and explore interpersonal communication with technologies in use at home and at work. By introducing business needs in an academic setting, a relationship is forged that helps create college graduates with more marketable skills and an insight to the inner-workings of the world beyond college. As a result, graduates successfully compete for jobs with some of the skills required on the job, acquired before they get the job.

Corporate Teams, Tools, and Interpersonal Skills

Corporate environments in which collaboration and team-building occur are found within social media communities that are specifically tailored to the needs of the workgroup. IBM products provide workgroup support tools that recreate mainstream environments like Facebook, offering social communities and collaborative groups. The IBM product, Lotus Connections, is one example of these interactive products. Boutin (2010) refers to it as "Facebook for Work" and explains, "IBM thinks social networking isn't just for fun—it can also make companies more efficient." The "Activities" component of Lotus Connections makes it easy to track work, share tasks with others in a professional network, manage team to-do's, and discover and share best practices by creating "activity templates" (Boutin). Obviously, with products like this readily available, technologically-driven team management tools have become a commonplace practice in many companies. As the business culture shifts to these new practices, discussions centered on communication competence arise, as well.

With ongoing technological advancements like Lotus Connections, that make professional online communication more dominant than in-person communication

events, debates abound that center on the erosion of in-person communication skills. Qualman (2011) asserts that the worst thing about social media is that "some people start to hide behind social media and their interpersonal communication skills diminish." (p. 272). On the other hand, Jue, Marr, and Kassotakis (2010) interviewed Cisco's curriculum planning and deployment lead, Greg Brower, who argues that the collaborative benefit of social media "engages employees in sharing knowledge and expertise" (p. 75). It can be argued that online sharing of knowledge and expertise requires skillful interpersonal communication skills. Interviews with several business experts who oversee corporate communications confirm this view.

Corporate Professionals Shed Light

IBM

In a phone conversation with Julie Brown, an IBM Lotus Notes Information Developer, she expressed that the focus for writers at work is on the audience and how to best connect with them (J. Brown, phone interview, June 7, 2011). Online communication is the norm for everyday interactions, including emailing, blogging, instant messaging, collaborating in internal social media communities, and using Facebook (2011). She discussed a "trial and error" approach in balancing between personal and professional identities, highlighting that this balancing act is a necessary interpersonal communication skill in all mediums, whether on the phone, in Facebook, or face-to-face.

She furthered the point by talking about proper etiquette and the dangers of interrupting the person on the other end of the communication exchange. Whether online or in-person, she said it is critical to listen well and practice using appropriate tone and language based on the particular audience. She regularly communicates with international audiences, specifically from China and India. Cultural and language differences require thoughtful sensitivity to be successful in those communications. She emphasized that it is very important, on both personal and business levels, to not accidentally insult audience members with inappropriate language or poorly written texts. While technology like instant messaging requires fast-paced typing that can

sometimes end without clear closure, in-person encounters can be just as awkward if the cultural expectations are unknown.

Another concern faced by IBM employees is the writer's representation of the company through the social media communication (J. Brown, phone interview, June 7, 2011). Often, companies provide training on how to create business-approved responses but, in rapid-fire settings, responses are not always fully contemplated, revised, and proofread. In this context, writers have to learn to craft a different type of presence compared to personal interactions on the Web. Without a doubt, whether the communication takes place through a technological medium or not, the requirements of successful communication are the same: a strong focus on and knowledge of the audience, well-written texts, courteousness, sincerity, and respect.

Best Buy

Gina Debogovich, Director and Social Media Leader at Best Buy, is clear about how to manage employees when dealing with customers (G. Debogovich, phone interview, December 13, 2010). In an online presentation that outlines the Best Buy philosophy to using social media, their approach is simple: "Social Media Policy: Be Smart, Be Respectful, Be Human" (2011). This philosophy was discussed in detail during a phone interview with Debogovich where she highlighted skills needed by today's college graduates. She placed an emphasis on writing well, writing succinctly, showing some personality within the writing, and the added bonus of having a grasp of gaming slang and terminology. She further stated that "most successful employees may not be social media savvy, but they can write great content and know how to talk to customers" (G. Debogovich, phone interview, December 13, 2010).

Debogovich explained that personal pictures are embedded with the employee's ID account in Twitter—through Best Buy's Twelpforce, "a collective force of Best Buy technology pros offering tech advice in Tweet form"—so the customer can connect with a person's face; this makes the communication more personal than when speaking to someone over the phone (Twelpforce). Trust and respect gradually emerge in the short, 140-character communications, resulting in effective interpersonal communication events. Arguably, something much more powerful occurs in the overtly simplistic series of Tweets: a human bond is forged.

This recurrent theme from business professionals is reasserted by Hartman and McCambridge's (2011) focus on the interactive process of communication and the need to help college students develop their interpersonal skills. Today's business communication student must learn how to accurately target a specific audience, and provide it with solutions that work. Hartman and McCambridge highlight two relevant and important teachable goals: "(1) business educators must help Millennials move toward a more audience-focused orientation and away from a primary focus on themselves, and (2) business educators must help Millennials become more focused on people rather than just focusing on technology" (p. 28). To achieve these goals, business communication instructors can incorporate workplace practices into curricular activities.

Current Trends and Uses of Social Media in Higher Education

A simple Google search reveals numerous sources that cite sound reasons for using social media in the classroom. Included in relevant discussions of the use of social media in today's classrooms, Barseghian (2011) argues for its usage due to the collaborative nature of the environment, the importance of the instructor having some technological knowledge, and blending classroom efforts to include the use of technology in lesson plans.

Furthermore, Johnson et al. explain the relevance of the social media trend as follows:

> As social networks continue to flourish, educators are using them as professional communities of practice, as learning communities, and as a platform to share interesting stories about topics students are studying in class. Understanding how social media can be leveraged for social learning is a key skill for teachers, and teacher training programs are increasingly being expected to include this skill (NMC Horizon Report, 2014, p. 10).

Recruiting and retaining students is critical to the success of higher education institutions, and instructors hold a key role by becoming more technologically engaged in their course plans. Informal brown-bag lunch settings are appropriate and convenient environments for an experienced instructor to lead an interested group of social media novices. Many instructors are currently using social media to connect with other academic communities—both inside and outside the university—manage their class

documents and their communication with students, and share electronic media, such as podcasts and videos.

Google has a plethora of tools that are free and easy to access for classroom environments. They also offer easy-to-follow instructions to those who are interested in using the products, i.e. Digital Literacy for Educators. Some examples of Google tools for education include, but are not limited to, the following: Google Docs, Google Apps, and Google Maps—Google Earth Outreach has a variety of free versions of tools. Bernard Gulachek, the Sr. Technology Director at the University of Minnesota states: "With Google Apps, we have the brains and insights of Google and the entire Google Apps community to help us update our communication and collaboration solutions on a continuous basis – and this innovation comes at no extra charge" (Google).

While trends in social media tools used in the classroom will come and go, instructors have many options available to help them meet their teaching goals for today's business writing students. For the most part, students are eager and excited to learn about today's online tools and how to use them appropriately before entering the job market.

Lessons from the Classroom

Corporate social media power users appear united in the opinion that, to satisfy today's customers, businesses must create professional online identities and stay abreast of their presence on social media websites. This requires diligent monitoring of their written content and their Web identities. Many college students cannot remember a time without publishing their words on the Web, and they are comfortable with digitally-public identities. Often, they are fluent in texting, gaming, and posting in Facebook.

Additionally, employers expect graduates to have strong writing and social media skills when they enter the workforce so they can interact with customers where customers interact. Unfortunately, business communication instructors often assume that students already have the appropriate social media skills. While students may have experience with the technologies, they do not have extensive practice in the concurrent interpersonal communication skills required in a business setting. This disconnect provides a prime opportunity for technologically-driven lesson plans that offer practice with online interpersonal communication skills that are expected of students when

they graduate and enter the workplace. Creation of a fictitious online company with students assuming different roles—some within the company and others that are external to the company, i.e., customers—enables exploration of internal and external online communication in a business setting. Through the lens of the fictitious company, students engage in meaningful discussions of audience analysis and the subsequent practice of writing for different audiences, with the company's goals and solid writing skills driving their simulated online exchanges.

One of the cocreators of Twitter, Dom Sagolla, wrote a companion text to educate Twitter users about the language of the tool. Sagolla's book (2009), 140 Characters: A Style Guide for the Short Form, is an informative exploration of the linguistic conventions used in social media platforms like Twitter. Sagolla's book functions as a how-to guide that covers all of the traditional aspects of good writing: audience analysis, persuasive techniques, style, grammar, and self-expression, to name a few. This new short form writing style is a skill that instructors can easily incorporate in their classroom assignments. Activities centered on the differences between traditional media—i.e. professional business letters—and today's Twitter texts, or Tweets, help students examine the pros and cons of each. In a specific class activity, I reiterate one of my student learning outcomes from my course syllabus, specifically: employ appropriate writing strategies to respond to the needs of readers in various contexts. I tell my classes that the word contexts includes technological contexts, as well.

In my business communication course, I conduct one activity where students write formal complaint letters to the Better Business Bureau (BBB). The entire activity, including the Twitter element, is entirely hypothetical. They prepare text for a Twitter post, but they do not actually submit it online. They follow all the conventions of traditional business letter writing to be sent via snail mail, voicing their grievance about a company's product or service. Then, they create a response that conveys the highlights of the formal BBB letter as a 140 character tweet that they could post on Twitter. I have also taken a similar approach by having students write a formal response—in the form of an adjustment letter—to an unhappy customer, as if the students were representing the business. I often have students work in groups of 2-3 to create a response to a writing prompt found in Mary Ellen Guffey's book (2010), Essentials of Business Communication. The prompt reads as follows: "When a company received an

expensive office painting with sags in the canvas, it complained. The seller, Manhattan Galleries, responded with [an] adjustment letter" (p. 153). Next, Guffey directs students to create a list of issues with the sample adjustment letter provided in the textbook. After creating a list of weaknesses with the text's adjustment letter, I have students write their own response to the disgruntled customer, in the form of a business letter. The following text is one group's letter:

> Dear Ms. Nickels:
>
> It appears that you have received a product from our company that you are not completely satisfied with, reporting that there is sagging in the canvas. One of the things we pride ourselves on is distributing a quality product, and we apologize that this instance has occurred. There is a possibility that the alteration to the product happened during the shipping process, but we cannot confirm that, so we take responsibility for what has happened.
>
> We encourage you to take the canvas into one of the local framing shops in your area, contact us, and we will cover the charge in full. Providing a quality product for our customers is of utmost importance to our company, and we hope that you will consider us again next time when purchasing a canvas.
>
> Sincerely,
>
> *Name*
>
> Title
>
> Phone number

Next, they were asked to create language they could post on Twitter—140 characters, or less—as if they were writing an online response to the complaint that was hypothetically posted on Manhattan Galleries' Twitter feed. To help students who were unfamiliar with Twitter, I showed them Best Buy's Twelpforce online Twitter feed, and discussed the pros and cons of this form of communication with customers. Then, I asked the class to read Twitter feeds of businesses they frequent, and create a list of observations to share with the class.

In the next class period, the students discussed their Twitter observations in small groups, and each group presented one observation to the entire class. Most of the students did not have familiarity with Twitter—or that type of communication channel, in general—that is used by many businesses today. However, they quickly took to the task of creating responses to the unhappy customer in Twitter format. The class

discussion focused on the global readership, as compared to the individual audience in the adjustment letter. In authoring the tweets, their rhetorical goals changed from simply fixing the faulty product to including messages of good will to promote their business to a global audience.

The following is the Twitter response provided by the same group who wrote the letter mentioned earlier. They assumed that the customer had tweeted her complaint, so they tweeted back to her the following:

> Apologize for the damaged product! Our mistake. Allow us to pay for the repairs at your local framing store #WeCare4OurCustomers#You Matter

Additional examples of Twitter responses created by student groups are presented below, as follows:

> @snickels We are sorry to hear about your painting! We will fix your issue for FREE!! Here is a FREE $50 gift card for the inconvenience!!

> We apologize for canvasing issues with our paintings on delivery. Attached is a 10% off coupon for your entire purchase! #canvas#print#loyalty

> @snickels Your canvas is on its way. We are investigating further packaging options to prevent further occurrences in the future.

> @SharonNickels We're sorry, feel free to take the painting to your local framing shop for restretching. #Manhattan will reimburse you 100%!

> @SharonN We apologize4our faulty product, we will fix the canvas freeofcharge. We learn from our mistakes & strive for customersatisfaction

When presented in tandem, the formal business letter proved to be a very different writing challenge compared to the 140-character customer complaints they created for a Twitter post. Interestingly, instead of focusing on the difficulties in writing the formal letter, the class verbalized amazement in the difficulty to create adequate text for their short tweets. They commented that they felt the writer of the tweet had to be more direct and careful since it was sent to a global audience. They discussed how the public response in Twitter communications made them feel a stronger obligation to "do what's right" for the customer since a global audience would be silently judging

them. They acknowledged that "bad news travels faster" in Twitter and the faster the business responds to the complaint, the better. Students actually felt that social media provides a better platform for writers to show off their customer service skills and that, in turn, challenges them to write more effectively than in the traditional formats. They liked the potential rapidity of problem identification and resolution that a quick tweet provides. As an instructor, it was pleasing to hear the repeated chorus that the Twitter author "still has to be a good writer." The students echoed the opinions of the business professionals cited earlier that strong writing skills are necessary for successful online communication.

Classroom exploration of appropriate expression of the personal self and the professional self within the context of writing in Twitter helps bridge students from the recreational use of social media to the workplace use of the same tools. Basic guidelines, or philosophical tenets, that I use in class when teaching with social media, include the following:

(1) *Nice and slow!* If new to social media, introduce social media gradually to a class and only to the extent that the instructor feels comfortable.

(2) *Watch and learn!* Explore technological tools first by having students observe the activity of others using the online tool, i.e., by following their favorite store's Twitter feed.

(3) *Student learning is paramount!* Explain how the use of the online activities will help them meet the student learning outcomes defined in the course syllabus, and explain the goals of the assignment so students will better understand what they need to do to succeed.

(4) *Rhetorical strategies come to life!* When writing a response to a customer complaint, students learn the traditional triad of audience, purpose, and context. Asking them to condense the response to 140 characters or less—for a different audience, purpose, and context—empowers them with a stronger consideration of their rhetorical choices.

(5) *Collaboration creates partnerships!* Idea sharing and communicating with others in a professional setting can be difficult to simulate in the classroom.

Providing social media activities in class allows for practice before students are expected to perform the skills on the job.

(6) ***Be flexible!*** By teaching the writing strategies necessary for social media sites, even the more inexperienced tech users will be able to contribute, if they have pen and paper writing tasks. Furthermore, it can be productive for some students, perhaps ones less comfortable in social media environments—i.e., Twitter—to create a traditional adjustment letter and then hand-write a Twitter response. In addition to potentially lowering the risk of intimidation for such students, this approach helps them examine the rhetorical differences between the two written forms of communication.

I have found that classroom activities where students brainstorm on the ramifications of acceptable and unacceptable online content are quite meaningful in the context of lessons that are focused on the job hunt. The importance of knowing what to keep private in an online personal identity becomes very clear when studying the practices of today's recruiters.

Recruiters and employers regularly scour the Web for information on prospective interviewees. Students quickly identify the devastating effects of a personal indiscretion captured online when a prospective employer never contacts them for an interview. All their hard work, revision, and editing of career documents are unproductive due to the online evidence found by the hiring manager's quick and simple Google search. In a situation like this, all the interpersonal communication skills in the world cannot overcome the negative first impression made online to a prospective employer. However, if the employer decides to take a chance and interview the candidate after all, we have an obligation to our students to prepare them with the persuasive techniques available to them to rectify the online disparity.

It is within this verbal context that, at times, rehearsed explanations regarding personal indiscretions that have been found online can save the day and, hopefully, get our college graduates hired. Just as Julie Brown suggested, finding the balance between personal and professional identities in online communication is challenging, but necessary (J. Brown, phone interview, June 7, 2011).

Conclusion

The ability to communicate within personal and professional identities is enhanced, and made more difficult, by the need to communicate in multiple media. Interpersonal communication demands ongoing adaptability in today's communication transactions. Nardi, Whittaker, and Bradner (2010), describe the practice of "media switching" when a communicator begins in one medium, i.e., online chatting, and then decides to call or email the person they are chatting with (p.114). The reasons for the move to a different medium are varied, but they all focus on the need for further "interaction" due to the conversation being "complicated," or if there was a lack of clarity in the chat environment (Nardi et al., 2010, p. 115).

Face-to-face interpersonal communication skills are expected in some communication events, while dynamic, technologically-driven skills are required in others. By structuring learning opportunities for students to practice all of these skills, we enable them to have a competitive edge as job candidates and well-earned rewards, in the future, as stellar employees. Without a doubt, they will flourish as professionals who conduct modern, day-to-day business, undaunted by the technologies they use or the accompanying communication interactions required by today's workplace culture. ■

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