

Social Media Helps Students Write Better

Are Social Networking Sites Harmful?, 2015

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Many people argue that the slang encouraged by social media has a bad effect on student writing. However, social media can help students, especially male high school students, reveal emotions and discuss topics that make their writing more powerful and honest. Male students are usually encouraged to be silent, contained, and not reveal emotions. On [Facebook](#), however, students routinely discuss personal issues and emotions and receive praise for doing so. This greater freedom to express themselves improves their writing at school.

The [Internet](#) has ruined high-school writing. Write the line on the board five hundred times like [cartoon character] Bart Simpson. Remember and internalize it. Intone it in an Andy Rooney-esque grumble.

I've heard the line repeated by dozens of educators and laypeople. I've even said it myself.

Thankfully it is untrue.

Emoticons vs. Emotional Honesty

As a high-school English teacher, I read well over a thousand student essays a year. I can report that complete sentences are an increasingly endangered species. I wearily review the point of paragraphs every semester. This year I tried and failed to spark a senior class protest against "blobs"—my pejorative term for essays lacking paragraphs. When I see a winky face in the body of a personal essay—and believe me, it has happened enough to warrant a routine response—I use a red pen to draw next to it a larger face with narrow, angry eyes and gaping jaws poised to chomp the offending emoticon to pieces Pac-Man-style. My students analyze good writing and discuss the effect of word choice and elegant syntax on an audience's reading experience. The uphill battle is worth fighting, but I'm always aware that something more foreboding than chronic senioritis lines up in opposition.

However, while Facebook and [Twitter](#) have eroded writing conventions among my students, they have not killed the most important ingredients in personal writing: self-reflection and emotional honesty. For younger high school boys particularly, social networking has actually improved writing—not the product or the process, but the sensitivity and inward focus required to even begin to produce a draft that will eventually be worth editing.

High school is cruel to all genders, an equal-opportunity destroyer of spirit and self-esteem. I'm focusing on boys because I've seen the phenomenon play out more intensely with them. Also, I was a boy once, and so I understand them better than I understand girls.

The emotional distance fostered by Facebook and other sites can encourage a healthier candor.

When I was beginning high school in 1994 boys knew not to reveal weakness and insecurity. Girls didn't seem to like guys who vocalized vulnerability. Athletes usually projected stereotypically masculine traits: along with imposing physical size, aggressive, even belligerent confidence, an easy stance, gait, and casual presence, the signs of being comfortable in their own skins. Even the scrawniest punk guitarists wore hoodies like armor and possessed a prickly toughness seasoned by the experience of having been bullied in middle school. The climate demanded stoicism, cool detachment as the default attitude for boys trying not to lose social standing. Young male attitudes were, as they still are, shaped by music and other forms of pop culture. Mainstream mid-90s rappers had cold-blooded personas. Even [rock singer for Nirvana] Kurt Cobain mumbled through interviews, only opening up in cathartic song, where the rawest admissions could be obtuse and readily cloaked in distortion. Everyone agonized over problems—height, acne, academic ability, body size, a lack of attention from girls, parents splitting up, sick grandparents, needy siblings, general alienation—but no one wanted to talk about them much. At age 14, I was small, smart, and artistic. I wrote well, but the prospect of writing anything that would permit even a teacher to know what I really thought terrified me. Spilling my guts in a [writers'](#) workshop with my classmates would have been social suicide.

Social networking has dramatically altered how high-school boys deal with their emotions.

Watching Facebook

I have a Facebook page dedicated solely to my position as an educator. I don't send friend requests to students but current and former students can send them to me and I always accept. I don't post much, but I keep up with some students and share literature-related links when I delude myself into thinking they'll be of interest. Current students often send me requests without thinking of the possible consequences of being Facebook friends with a teacher. I have made it a policy to avoid bringing a student's posts into a conference with a parent or counselor unless required to do so by law. A few times a week though, I log on and observe what students post.

My observations have reaffirmed the widely held notion that the Internet is no refuge from the pains of adolescence. It's a really bad neighborhood. On Facebook and Twitter, students humiliate, jeer, and shame one another. They engage in antisocial, even criminal behavior—leaving belligerently racist comments on links, harassing classmates with derogatory posts.

At the same time, the emotional distance fostered by Facebook and other sites can encourage a healthier candor, too. On Facebook, even popular students post statuses in which they express insecurities. I see a dozen every time I log on. A kid frets that his longtime girlfriend is straying and wishes he hadn't upset her. Another admits to being lonely (with weepy emoticons added for effect). Another asks friends to pray for his sick little sister. Another worries the girl he gave his number to isn't interested because she hasn't called in the 17 minutes that have passed since the fateful transaction. Another disparages his own intellect. "I'm so stupid, dad told me to drop out," he writes. Another wonders why his parents are always angry, and why their anger is so often directed at him. "Brother coming home today," another posts. "Gonna see how it goes."

Individually these may seem like small-scale admissions. But the broader trend I have witnessed in the past few years stands in sharp contrast to the vigilance with which my generation guarded our fears

both trivial and deep. In this sense, social networking has dramatically altered how high-school boys deal with their emotions.

Instead of being mocked for revealing too much, students who share in this way win likes and supportive comments from male friends. Perhaps part of it is the fact that girls appear to appreciate the emotional candor and publicly validate it with likes and comments, giving boys the initiative to do the same. In high-school halls, guards stay up, but online, male emotional transparency is not only permitted but also celebrated. Surely, the current crop of "sensitive" rappers has also encouraged this—especially standard-bearer Kanye West, who treats albums like therapy sessions and doesn't mind welling up on national television. In addition to their insecurities, boys share affectionate admissions of platonic love to one another that they wouldn't feel as comfortable sharing in person. They post "I admit" and "To be honest" notes on one another's pages in which they celebrate fraternal bonds.

Just as social networking frees users from public decorum ... it allows my students to safely, if temporarily, construct kinder, gentler versions of themselves as well.

"You my bro cause you always have time to talk."

"Even when there no one else you got me."

However trite, these public expressions may be the seeds of richer revelations.

Writing as Healing

Because it happens on the Internet, the candor is a simulation of how a more evolved young male culture might operate. Despite the Drake pics captioned with the rapper's soft-headed couplets, the fight videos, and the countless time-wasting surveys and games that pollute the average high-school student's feed, I see the online social universe my students traverse as an improvement over my high-school terrain. Many of my students grow up in households in which machismo reigns supreme. They've never been allowed to cry. Their mothers and sisters cook and wash the dishes and clean. They've been encouraged to see themselves as dominant, powerful, swaggering, sullen men, not sensitive and reflective men, powerfully kind, confidently open. Fostering those traits is a woman's responsibility, like housework. In this sense, Facebook is a genuine outlet for the young men I teach. Just as social networking frees users from public decorum and encourages the birthing of troll alter egos, it allows my students to safely, if temporarily, construct kinder, gentler versions of themselves as well.

The great news is that this has a positive effect on teaching and learning. My students in 2013 are more comfortable writing about personal issues than were my classmates in the mid-late '90s. When I assign narrative essays, students discuss sexual abuse, poverty, imprisoned family members, alcoholic parents, gang violence, the struggle to learn English in America—topics they may need to address, not merely subjects they believe might entertain or interest a reader.

After all, we write for an audience and we write for ourselves too. I see students recognizing the value

of tackling these topics with honesty. I notice that they are relieved when they do so. Sometimes students address the same topic in several essays over the course of the year, updating me, their confidante, on the status of a specific situation. When they share these essays with the rest of the class, they turn the two-way conversation (their writing, my feedback) into a network. Writing isn't just about the spilling of guts, obviously, but the transparency encouraged by social networking has laid the foundation for this freedom. When this freedom results in powerful, honest writing, it can in turn result in true healing for kids—not just the momentary reassurance a well-received status update may provide.

Further Readings

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Source Citation

Simmons, Andrew. "Social Media Helps Students Write Better." *Are Social Networking Sites Harmful?* Ed. Noah Berlatsky. Farmington Hills, MI: Greenhaven Press, 2015. At Issue. Rpt. from "Facebook Has Transformed My Students' Writing—For the Better." *Atlantic* (18 Nov. 2013). *Opposing Viewpoints in Context*. Web. 11 May 2015.

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Gale Document Number: GALE|EJ3010744227