Using Facebook to Explore Adolescent Identities


**Abstract:** This study examines the construction, deconstruction and reconstruction of adolescent identities through an exploration of their social practices within a digital landscape using mobile devices and Facebook for learning in the classroom and in their lives. Using a mixed methods research approach of qualitative case study analysis and quantitative surveying, the research investigates the relationship between a multiliteracies pedagogy and the development of adolescent digital literacies and identity. More specifically, it answers the following research questions: (a) How are adolescents’ identities shaped and performed, as they use new media tools and social media in the classroom? (b) How does the use of mobile devices and Facebook in the classroom potentially transform teaching and learning literacy practices?

**Keywords:** multiliteracies; adolescents; digital literacies; Facebook; pedagogy; identities; mobile devices; social practices

**Introduction:**

The vast majority of today’s adolescents are immersed in a reality characterized by mobile devices such as smart phones, tablets and laptop computers. It is through these devices, along with social networking sites like Facebook and through a multiliteracies pedagogy, that students can explore their emerging identities, giving them voice and agency in their learning communities and the larger global community.

Using a mixed methods research approach of qualitative case study analysis and surveying, this research investigates the relationship between a multiliteracies pedagogy and the development of adolescent digital literacy and sense of identity. More specifically, this paper focuses on how two classes of adolescents aged 14-15, reflected on the construction of their various identities with a focus on their Facebook/social media identities. This was done through a unit on poetry where the students explored current youth issues like cyber-bullying, depression and body image, and the various prior experiences that have shaped the creation of their identities. The unit was delivered in a rich media setting, using Facebook, Twitter and print texts in digital form that students accessed through Android tablets and desktop computers. They also created their own digital and multimodal texts as a way of representing their understanding regarding the construction of their various real and online/Facebook identities.

**Theoretical Framework:**

*Adolescent Identity, Social Networking Media and Multiliteracies*
Youth are naturally concerned with their developing identities, and they are constantly trying to find ways to express themselves. In our increasingly digitally connected world, adolescents are relying more often on social networking to communicate and to present themselves to the world. As of March 2013, Facebook reported 655 million daily active users (Facebook.com). Many of these global users are adolescents and young adults as evidenced from Mori’s (2007) research which found that more than 95% of British students ages 16-18 used social networking sites (Wang, et al., 2012) and Moore’s (2010) research which found nearly one million South African young adults ages 14-24 used Facebook (Rambe, 2012). Adolescents are using their mobile devices and home computers to access social networks such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram and according to a Pew Research Center report published in May 2013, teens are sharing more personal information on social media profiles than ever before (p. 30).

This rapid adoption of new technologies and the social networking platforms that have become ever easier to access from mobile devices has implications for the adolescents who use them. In their work on multiliteracies, Cope and Kalantzis (2000) identify the different domains in students’ lives (i.e. Lifeworlds and School-Based Worlds) as discourse worlds and they draw on these various domains or worlds to make meaning and create identities. Anstey and Bull (2006) suggest that “these domains or discourse worlds also help form a person’s literacy identity, providing a repertoire of resources that a person can draw on when engaging in literate practices” (34). They further note that a student’s literacy identity “includes social and cultural resources, technological experience, and all previous life experiences, as well as specific literacy knowledge and experience” (35). Weber and Mitchell’s (2008) notion of identity as “personal and social bricolage” views identity construction as “an evolving active construction that constantly sheds bits and adds bits, changing through dialectical interactions with the digital and non-digital world, involving physical, psychological, social, and cultural agents” (43).

As there is a clear connection between literacy practices and the development of identity, Alvermann (2010) suggests that social networking platforms are the perfect arena for students to perform their emerging identities. Jones and Hafner (2012) explain that “people’s Facebook walls are like stages on which they act out conversations with their friends” and display their personal preferences, interests and activities (p.154). In terms of education, some commentators contend that SNSs [social networking sites] offer “the capacity to radically change the educational system … to better motivate students as engaged learners rather than learners who are primarily passive observers of the educational process” [Ziegler, (2007), p.69]. For example, on Facebook students can connect and collaborate with like-minded peers. They can comment on important issues that concern them, opening a dialogue amongst peers. They can also join groups to discuss and share information. In being an active part of this community of learners, students develop a stronger sense of identity as they present and discuss items that are important to them. Beach et al. (2011) point out that participation in SNS enable students to develop a sense of agency through the enactment of online personas, referring to what danah boyd (2006) defines as “networked politics” (p.6).

It is not surprising that educators have leveraged the popularity of Social Networking Sites [SNSs], and particularly Facebook, in their teaching and these tools have quickly
gained credibility as e-learning tools for the classroom (Bosch, 2009). Using Facebook provides many social and connective benefits, which challenge the traditional hierarchical teaching structure, potentially creating a more democratic, active and thus engaging classroom environment. Facebook also has the power to make the learning process more collaborative, constructivist and, ultimately, connectivist in nature. Facebook, therefore, appears to be a practical education tool for collaboration and knowledge building due to its ubiquitous use amongst students. In their Facebook research, McCarthy (2012) Irwin et al. (2012), Shih (2011) and Wang (2012) report many students already had an account, knew how to use the platform and/or found it convenient to use as an education tool as they were often on Facebook anyway. The classroom instructors used walls, events and groups to encourage knowledge generation, resource and artifact sharing, and active learning. They also used it to make learning visible and to encourage greater peer-peer and student-instructor interaction – all elements proven to increase motivation and encourage greater student engagement.

Much of the research to date on the affordances of SNSs highlights the collaboration, knowledge generation and active learning that can occur. Irwin et al. (2012) found that SNSs like Facebook have the potential to shift course learning from content- to process-based. This was primarily achieved through greater student-peer and student-instructor interaction. McCarthy (2012), Rambe (2012), Shih (2011) and Wang (2012) reported similar results where students were engaged in dialogue and information/resource sharing with their peers, teachers and mentors, thus generating knowledge for themselves. This innovative shift aligns with Siemens (2006) founding principle of Connectivism that values dynamic and adaptive knowledge production through connected networks of novices and experts. Where previously instructors were viewed as the holders of knowledge in a linear hierarchy, students were able to easily share valuable information along a horizontal plane becoming the “principal knowledge brokers rather than information receivers” (Rambe, 2012, p.310). In the studies conducted by Shih (2011) and Wang et al. (2012), it was clear the increased interaction with instructors boosted students’ overall satisfaction with the course and made the learning process more meaningful, both of which have been proven to increase academic success.

In addition to Facebook’s inherently connectivist framework, Rambe (2012) and Shih (2011) found that it supports a constructivist model where students can engage in inquiry-based and collaborative learning, constructing their own knowledge and understanding. Based on these studies, which were primarily focused on tertiary education, it is clear that Facebook can create an overall positive learning experience in the classroom through its collaborative, active and democratic learning model. It is also clear that this model encourages positive communities of practice where students can feel a sense of agency, connect with their peers and teachers and ultimately enjoy the process of learning.

Adolescents’ use of Facebook in their personal lives is already prolific thanks to mobile devices such as smart phones, tablets and laptop computers. According to the most recent Pew Research Center survey data, 47% of teens surveyed indicated they owned a Smartphone, such as an iPhone or Android (p. 93), 23% of teens own a tablet computer like an iPad, Samsung Galaxy, Motorola Xoom or Kindle Fire (p. 93), 33% of teens use their cell phone mostly to use the internet (p. 106), 80% of teens surveyed indicated they own a
desktop or laptop computer (p. 93), 81% of online teens say they use social networking sites such as Facebook (p. 20) and 42% visit SNSs several times/day (p. 98). In this out-of-school reality, students are already engaged in the process of identity construction and performance. It is therefore important for schools to start seeing Facebook as a useful tool in the development of students’ digital literacies and social identities in order to: 1) positively influence their developmental processes; 2) create learning communities that are collaborative and supportive in nature and bridge students’ out-of-school realities with their in-school realities; and 3) empower students to collaborate and speak out about issues of importance. Despite the pedagogical potential of SNSs, however, there are constraints on educators in secondary schools that prevent them from tapping into Facebook as a learning platform. Although school districts around the globe are busy creating policies about the use of social media networking sites in K-12 education, most teachers are still being warned by their administrators and district leaders to avoid using Facebook with their students. As a result, there is a dearth of research related to the use of Facebook in K-12 education. An additional barrier is that an increasing adult presence on Facebook is driving adolescents to other sites such as Twitter and Instagram (Pew Research Centre, 2013). In our study, we focus less on the use of Facebook as a tool for interacting with students in an online space, and instead, explore the intersection of adolescents' out-of-school practices with Facebook, their perceived online identities and Facebook as a teaching tool to explore emerging/multiple adolescent identities.

**Methodology:**

**Setting**

The research was conducted in two grade 9 classes at a secondary school in central Toronto, Ontario. The morning class consisted of 17 males and 9 females and the afternoon class consisted of 10 males and 15 females for a total of 51 students. The school hosts a mix of mid to lower-income-family students, with 31% of the school population speaking a primary language other than English. Each class had a combination of students who had access to technology and the Internet outside of school and students who did not. Despite this income discrepancy and for some, a lack of access to the Internet, at least 75% of students had their own Facebook account. Of the 25% who did not have Facebook accounts, it was typically due to a lack of interest, rather than a lack of access to the technology only. Rather than insisting that these students create a Facebook account, we asked them to pull words and phrases from the websites they visited most often – so this was less an exploration of how they constructed their identity online and more an exploration of what they were constantly exposed to online from their favorite sites.

The participating grade 9 teacher had limited experience with technology and even less experience with the Facebook platform. As a result, he was not able to assist the students in the tasks associated with the social networking sites. He reportedly felt that he had less credibility with the students in this area, saying:

I’ve found in studying media in the past that – well you know a lot, and so you have a lot of credibility with them because you know what you’re talking about and you can actually teach them. But, a lot of the times when
teachers – and I don’t mean just because I’m elderly – but, you know when you try to talk about something that they think that they know about they don’t go for it – they resist. They put up blocks.

As a result of being less tech- and social-networking savvy, he admitted to using more traditional teaching methods in his English classes – rarely incorporating technology and never including out-of-school social networking practices into assignments.

For the most part, the study was conducted in the classroom using the Poetry 101 application (app) for Android tablets, which is an introduction to poetry app covering poetry basics such as the elements of poetry, major periods of poetic history and influential/famous poets. The students also worked in the computer lab using desktop computers and the Internet to access Facebook and other social networking sites. Throughout the project students used Facebook to complete various poetry-writing and identity-reflection activities. It was used as a tool to examine what it means to actively construct one’s identity and the idea that individuals project different identities in different contexts – their online identity on Facebook being one example. Drawing attention to who they are and how they act online was the first step in empowering the students to find their voices. Students wrote poetry surrounding this process of self-discovery and then were introduced to the idea that social networking sites like Facebook can be also be used as platforms to raise awareness for important youth issues like cyberbullying, depression and body image.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

We used a sequential mixed methods strategy for this project, combining both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. The quantitative research component was designed to capture demographic and attitudinal data using survey research methodology. Prior to working with participants in each setting, all were invited to complete an anonymous survey. In the pre-unit survey, questions were asked in order to determine how students are currently using digital tools in their out-of-school lives and to gauge the extent of their experience with web-based tools such as social networking sites, e.g. What types of technology do you personally own or have regular access to? How much time do you spend on the Internet on a typical day? The pre- and post-surveys used the same questions to determine any shifts in attitudes towards technology use and use of Facebook as a tool to explore students’ identities. The surveys were designed to allow for comparisons across cases and for triangulation using the data from the surveys along with observations, field notes, individual interviews with students and teachers, the digital and multimodal texts created by students, and video recordings of selected learning/authoring activities. As Bruce points out, case studies “provide the best
articulation of adolescents’ media literacy processes, especially as much of the emergent forms of their use has not been studied” [Bruce, (2009), p.302]. We attempted to elicit information regarding attitudes towards issues associated with adolescent identity primarily through writing prompts that included the use of Facebook. These prompts were based on the themes of adolescent identity and/or adolescent issues they identified as important, such as relationships, future goals, cyber-bullying and mental health. We selected six students from each class at the recommendation of the teacher and conducted brief, open-ended, follow-up interviews with them during class time.

Analysis of the data required several different layers of coding and interpretation. In the first stage the bulk of the data was coded for various themes that emerged. We coded the interview transcripts following traditional coding procedures (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) and compared themes across the different cases in order to identify recurring and overlapping thematic and structural patterns (Black, 2007). In the authoring of the student texts, we were particularly interested in moments that might be interpreted as “turning points” (Bruner, 1994) in the representation of identity and/or the conceptual understanding of adolescent issues. The analytic methods included thematic coding (Miles 1994) and critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 1995). The data was read and coded for major themes and sub-themes across data sources, and the codes were revised and expanded as more themes emerged.

**The Research Design**

*The Digital Activities and Facebook*

Students revisited basic poetic devices and then learned about the following genres of poetry over the course of six weeks: Found poetry, Spoken Word poetry and Rhyming Couplet poetry, Twitter, YouTube, the skooool.ie online poetry interactive and the Poetry 101 app on the Android tablet. For the purposes of this paper, we focus our attention on the Found poetry genre in which students used Facebook to craft their poems and explore how they present themselves on Facebook.

As a way of scaffolding their work with poetry and Facebook, the students were introduced to Found poetry with an example of a poem constructed entirely from Facebook status updates and asked to determine what kind of person the author might be based on the types of status updates s/he posts. After, students created a Found poem based on their own status updates and reflected on what kind of persona they project on Facebook. Although all of the student poems have been analyzed, for the purposes of this paper we focus on the five following representative examples.

**The Findings:**

According to our survey results, the students visited Facebook more often than any other SNS, with Twitter and Google+ the second and third SNSs of choice (See Fig. 1). Fifteen of the students reported spending 1-5 hours per week on Facebook, fifteen reported spending more than 15 hours per week on Facebook and twenty participants spent between 5 and 15 hours per week on Facebook. Only three of the students reported
spending less than 3 hours on Facebook per week (See Fig. 2). Two of the students who completed the pre-survey changed classes after the study began.

Figure 1. SNSs most often visited

Figure 2. Hours spent on Facebook

The students reported engaging in a wide variety of activities on their various SNSs, but the majority of them used Facebook or Twitter to chat with friends, check their friends’ status updates and to post their own status updates (See Fig. 3).

Figure 3. Most common SNS activities
A much richer picture of the students’ use of Facebook is demonstrated through the poetry they created based on their status updates and comments. They were able to identify and isolate patterns in their Facebook activity and arrange them into coherent sounding/thematic poems. Without first developing an awareness around how they project themselves, the students would not have crafted such cohesive Found poems. In addition, their writing makes clear very pressing issues with which adolescents struggle. Themes that emerge from these poems include depression, feelings of isolation, insecurity and identity confusion/fluidity. Below we discuss four sample poems that contain one or more of the aforementioned themes:

To my…

To my sweet sugar coated Choco
Mallow milky shaky
Honey dipped cheese
I wonder if I’m anyone’s crush.
You’re never alone, okay?
Someone somewhere
Cares about you and wants you to be alright
Even if it’s just a random person you met
On the internet
You loved
Don’t forget that

In this poem about supporting others, the speaker clearly believes it is necessary to be loved, to have love for others, and, most importantly, to exercise an awareness of the love one gives and receives "even if it's just a random person you met on the internet." The poet clearly is not struggling with feelings of isolation or anger, as are some poets in the poems to follow. This is evidenced in the line, "You're never alone, okay?" The poet must feel enough support in her life to make such an affirming and outwardly focused statement as this is not typical of an adolescent perspective – one normally characterized by inward reflection and insecurity. Additionally, the poet is aware that even if someone feels alone, in our technology saturated and connected society, it is nearly impossible to actually be alone anymore. There are many ways to connect with others and feel love or care: "Someone somewhere / Cares about you and wants you to be alright." It is clear from this poem that the author takes comfort in the companionship s/he finds online.

ON THE RISE

HoopDreams
A Champion lives within me
I Work Hard, So one day it should pay off
Double Practice, LETS GO
How Bad Do You Really Want It
Look How Far We Came
Don't Ever Give Up
GO hard or GO home
HoopDreams
A Champion lives within me

This poem relates the hard work and enormous dedication it takes to achieve one's goals or dreams. While the other poems are concerned with adolescents’ present problems, this poem is forward-looking. The poet's main concern is working hard in the present in order to achieve a difficult future goal. The poet is less concerned about an unfixed identity, and is instead focused on his sports aspiration, which informs who he is and how he must act in the present. The author is clearly not afraid to devote the necessary hours to realize his dream. He also positions himself as a leader with the commanding lines: "Double Practice, LETS GO / How Bad Do You Really Want It." The poet sounds like a coach or team captain and recognizes that it is only through team-work that his individual goal can be achieved.

He is also aware that in order to turn a dream into reality, total commitment to the task is required as he says: "GO hard or GO home." Finally, he clearly believes in himself as he begins and ends the poem with the declarative statement: "A Champion lives within me." This type of confidence is not uncommon amongst adolescents with clear goals and a more defined sense of self. While the poem allows the reader to see the dedication this adolescent has to his goals, it is not an intimate poem that reveals the adolescent’s emotions or much else about his inner landscape. Undoubtedly this is an easier poem to construct. Like the other Found poems, it is based on his Facebook status updates, so one could conclude this student’s Facebook identity is not as revealing as some of the other students who choose to post items about depression, anxiety and isolation. However, using Facebook as a way to celebrate successes or communicate goals equally garners support from others and encourages one on his/her path to success.

That’s just me

I know I’m Bipolar, I’M SENSITIVE , I say stuff I don’t mean
I’m confused about everything lately
Need time to think things over
I’m still alive but I’m barely breathing.
I get mad over the smallest things
I actually can’t contain myself
I WISH I could Download happiness
But I still shine bright like a diamond.

This poem details the emotions experienced by an adolescent as she tries to navigate identity development within the context of mental health issues. She professes to be "SENSITIVE" and to "say stuff I don't mean" indicating that her words and actions might often be misunderstood by others, adding to the inner turmoil in the identity development
process. The author also professes to being alive but "barely breathing" reflecting that she is merely existing rather than living. The stress of dealing with a mental illness appears to have stripped life of joy for the poet, reducing her to an organism with no real identity. The poet is concerned about her search for happiness: "I WISH I could Download happiness" indicating she does not feel it is within her grasp or control. Like many, she craves the easy solution of downloading happiness instantly, which raises the question of whether or not she possess the life-tools to do so. The reference to downloading is reflective of a technology culture where items are instantly and effortlessly obtained.

Compared to the poem "On the Rise," this poem reveals intimate details about the author's current state of mind. It is more challenging to share such intimate and personal details about oneself, as opposed to the relatively anonymous or protected voice apparent in “On the Rise.” In the poem, the author chose not to share any specific details about his internal emotional state with the reader -- keeping the content general. The author here puts herself "out there" -- a common feature in social networking. It has become the norm now for adolescents to reveal intimate details about their mental states and personal lives online for peers to witness and comment upon. It is the performativity of this and the interaction, feedback, advice and commiseration or consolation it elicits from peers that aids in identity development and growth.

Possible side affects

“I’m so firkin mad today someone really needed to mess up my day today”
we don’t have late starts anymore…F.M.L.”
“people can be so frieken rude and judgemental I feel really bad for the ones that cant de with people BS like I can.”
“If I cause to much drama why haven’t you deleted me yet….. ummmm.”
“I times like this I just wanna cry.”
“Cant believe your gone”
“I just need a hug :’(”
“sad how he changed for the worst.”
“If your not working on trying to be mine you shouldn’t be worrying about who’s consuming my time.”
“thoughts that occur in my head of who would come to my funeral if I died.”
“I refuse to let a man make a fool out of me and I refuse to let a female take me out of character.”
So you’re the B that told the B that I’m a B? well listen B it takes a B to know a B…… kay B?
“f it lifes tough, but that’s life when your living in the slums.”

This poem is a collection of status updates that reflect emotional extremes from anger to sadness to loneliness. The title, "Possible side affects [sic]." is indicative of the extreme side effects characteristic of the poet's adolescent stage of life. The poem bounces abruptly from one emotional state to another: "I'm so firkin mad today…" to "I just need a hug." The combination of long and descriptive emotionally charged sentences with the
short and lamenting or sad sentences, further mirrors the extremes adolescents can experience. The poet seems to be trying to find grounding in the chaotic mix of emotions she is experiencing. She also seems concerned with gender identity as she states, "I refuse to let a man make a fool out of me and I refuse to let a female take me out of character." The poet has issues with other females and is aware of the potential that another female may provoke her “out of character.” To this point, the second last sentence is directed to another female, using the derogatory short form "B." She states: "So you're the B that told the B that I'm a B? well listen B it takes a B to know a B……kay B?" Evidently, she is defensive and reactionary when it comes to other females and as a result, appears insecure, rather than strong. Her self-perceived strength presents in overcompensation, which reveals her true insecurity: "I feel really bad for the ones that can't de with people BS like I can" and "f it lifes tough. but that's life when your living in the slums." The voice in the poem is defensive and confrontational with an attempted devil-may-care attitude that is at once undermined by the revelation of the author's sensitive side or weaknesses: "I times like this I just wanna cry" and "thoughts that occur in my head of who would come to my funeral if I died." While she pretends a rough exterior, she also reveals very intimate, real and accessible insecurities -- pushing the reader away at some points, while making herself vulnerable at others. This is reflective of the push and pull duality of adolescence.

There is a clear ‘performance’ quality to many of the poems, especially those which pose questions inviting a response: “If I cause to much drama why haven’t you deleted me yet….. ummmm” and “I wonder if I’m anyone’s crush?” In addition, many lines carry an intimate quality, even though they are being shared in a public space: “You’re easily all I think about” and “A Champion lives within me” and “I’m still alive but I’m barely breathing” allowing others access to their inner monologues and inviting comments from peers – an important social process that further shapes identity.

Overall, the poems demonstrate a push and pull quality, juxtaposition or dual identity. While the authors may not have been cognizant of this, these conflicts represent the internal struggle adolescents typically endure in the process of self-discovery. Furthermore the intimate quality of the poems reveals the details these adolescents are posting on their Facebook walls. They clearly feel comfortable sharing private information with the public/a large friend group on Facebook. Where adolescents may not have felt comfortable sitting down with a friend, peer or adult to discuss these serious topics in a formal one-on-one setting, Facebook provides an informal, open platform for important issues to be aired. The Facebook platform invites comments, consolation and discussion from peers – all of which help students contextualize and work through these developmental markers.

Discussion:

**Online Identities and Found Poems**

These Found poem examples were interesting artifacts to analyze, especially against the responses recorded on the post-project survey. Approximately 50% of students indicated
Facebook does not help in or reflect identity development, claiming that their online personalities were exactly the same as their in-person personalities. They also indicated that they consciously chose not to reveal intimate details about themselves to avoid the risk of sharing personal information with strangers or people they didn’t know well. Through most of their poems, however, it is evident that while they may not reveal certain identifying pieces of personal information on Facebook, they are still choosing to reveal emotional pieces of personal information. Despite claims that they are not open with their personal information, when visiting the students profile pages, it is certainly possible to get a sense of their unique personalities: likes, dislikes, goals and emotional concerns and struggles.

Seventy-five per cent of students connected with the use of Facebook and social media sites in the classroom. One student reported, “I liked it because it really tied in with teenagers. They use social media and I liked how, um, we got to use that and make a poem from what we found on the websites so that was a lot of fun.” Another student reported, “I use them everyday anyway. The one I enjoyed the most was Facebook because I got to check my status during the day instead of having to wait till I got home.” Staying socially connected was important for these students and being able to stay connected while doing work at school was a new concept for them.

It was so new, in fact, that some students rejected the use of Facebook and the tablets in an academic setting indicating that they were too much of a “distraction” and that “…personal tech is something that is only used outside of class.” Some of the student comments reflected the finding of the Pew Research Center’s 2013 report on Teens, Social Media and Privacy, that many adolescents now associate Facebook “with constraints through an increasing adult presence, high pressure or otherwise negative social interactions (“drama”), or feeling overwhelmed by others who share too much” (p. 26). Others had concerns of safe-use of Facebook saying, “social networking sites are also annoying. There is the worry of your account getting hacked, people spamming you and creepy messages from unknown people.” Various student responses such as this one indicate that there is a need to educate students on safe online practices. Students seemed particularly aware of the ‘permanent’ and very public nature of Facebook. Three students indicated they don’t put much personal information on Facebook for fear of leaving themselves vulnerable. However, in the context of the poetry unit, Facebook proved to be a non-threatening, familiar platform through which to introduce a unit on poetry – a unit many were wary of starting due to the abstract and perceived inaccessible nature of it. A common sentiment among the students regarding the use of Facebook in poetry can be seen in this student’s response: “I enjoyed using the social networking website because I go on them a lot at home.” Incorporating a platform that students are comfortable using allowed many an entry point to the unfamiliar through the familiar. It is through projects such as this that students can be made aware of their various identities with a focus on their online identity and presence. Once they are aware, they can begin to actively think about who they want to be in-person, and how they want to project themselves to friends, family and even the world.

**Development of Self and a Shift Toward Empathy & Activism**
An analysis of the found poems, and thus the students’ Facebook status updates, indicate that the primary purposes of posting updates include seeking support from others and sharing their emotional states. On the other hand, posts on other people’s walls tended to be forms of support and encouragement. From the poetry unit, it was clear certain students’ identities were shaped as they used social media in the classroom to examine their own identities and various adolescent/youth issues. As these students found their poetic voices and explored their inner and outer selves, they became impassioned, and it became easier for them to speak out against issues facing adolescents. One student wrote on her post-project survey that assignments like this can “get others to be more aware of bullying and depression.” Another student wrote that she would use social networking sites to raise awareness on youth issues by “talk[ing] to relatives in other countries.” And another indicated that she would want “to let people know bullying is bad.” These were the most responsive students who were willing to explore their various identities and who eventually understood that their online selves are edited versions of their whole personalities. One student wrote, “I feel that technology can help students develop their sense of identity because you can express yourself more freely on the Internet than in real life.”

Unfortunately, not all of the students came to understand how technology and social networking sites play a role in identity development and this was echoed in the following two responses: “I think you can express yourself in person the same as on social networking sites” and “I’m not different online or anything.” Even at the end of the project, at least 50% of the students from both classes still failed to acknowledge that their personalities change depending on the context and that their Facebook identities are only one version of who they are as people. These were the same students who did not connect in a personal way with the topics. They were not impassioned, nor did they see Facebook as a venue to raise awareness about adolescent issues. They may have felt shy, embarrassed or uncool doing so. Therefore, this highlights the need for educators to incorporate a critical analysis of Facebook and its role in identity development, and to start incorporating Facebook as a tool for raising awareness about critical issues facing adolescents. This would reshape how students think about the potential of social networking sites at such a formative age.

Teaching and Learning Practices with Facebook

The project was collaborative in nature – students mostly worked in pairs or small groups which the students found motivating: “I really liked this unit and I really want to do more of poetry and it was a lot of fun and you got to interact with other people, which is cool as well.” The unit was also largely grounded in inquiry-based learning and positioned the students as active learners. As a result, some of the weaker students found starting the tasks or staying focused on them challenging. These were also the students who generally did not empathize with or take seriously the youth issues addressed in class. Many of the tasks required a degree of maturity and knowledge of ‘good practice’ when using Facebook in the classroom – positive online interaction and staying focused being the main concerns. As a result, the teacher needed to constantly monitor the students’ progress, highlighting a need for teachers to incorporate good practice lessons prior to using Facebook as a tool in the classroom.
With a focus on identities, the creation of Found poems using Facebook status updates was an excellent entry point into subsequent work on using social networking sites to raise awareness about social justice issues. The notion of ‘slacktivism’ or ineffective/passive ‘activism’ is one that needs to be taken up in future studies. Are individuals really taking a useful kind of action by ‘liking’ posts or signing petitions linked on Facebook? Do they fully understand the issues and are their actions sufficient to bring about meaningful change? (Fox, 2012). As Jenkins (2006) asserts, the online world of social networking sites encourages a type of ‘participatory culture,’ however, the type and depth of participation needs to be deconstructed with students to reveal its real value. It is therefore important for students to understand that social justice activism on Facebook is a good entry into social justice activism and it is a good platform to raise awareness, however, a deeper analysis of the issues and a critical and meaningful engagement with the causes are necessary. To do this, teachers must first allow students to interact on Facebook in groups of interest organized around an issue like cyber-bullying, youth depression, or violence in schools, in order to discuss, develop ideas, research, and build and share knowledge. Once students have explored their issue of interest, their task could be to create a piece of digital media to be shared on Facebook to raise awareness and start a larger discussion. This discussion could potentially attract a variety of opinions from diverse/global perspectives. In this way, students utilize Facebook as a social activism platform, but in a meaningful way where they are truly participating – becoming educated on the issues and creating something to further the dialogue, rather than just clicking, ‘like,’ leaving a comment or signing a petition.

**Conclusion:**

By tapping into students’ out-of-school realities – the majority heavily immersed in the digital world with personal computing and handheld devices, the Internet and social media networks – and using a multiliteracies pedagogy, students were able to connect with the content, the technology-based teaching tools and the multimodal learning tasks. Furthermore, it is now clear there is a need for educators to examine how students create their various identities – real and online – and to teach critical and digital literacy skills in order to develop socially sensitive and aware adolescents. In an upcoming iteration of this research project, we will be exploring the ways that Facebook reads user content to target advertisements to specific individuals in their newsfeeds. More recently, advertisers have been paying to have user stories and interactions (such as "liking" a page, receiving updates from "liked" pages, checking into local businesses or sharing content from external sites) turned into featured ads. We will have students investigate how Facebook perceives them based on the ads that appear in their newsfeeds. Students need to be made aware that sites like Facebook use this kind of “covert advertising and the corporate harvesting of market data” and that they “are owned, designed and structured for different kinds of content production, distribution and interaction” [Alvermann, (2010), p.61]. It is the identity transparency on Facebook that “breeds advertising…by encouraging people to share information about themselves with more and more people…” [Jones and Hafner, (2012), p.151]. Good practice would require teachers to first critically deconstruct Facebook as a marketing and media tool, before blindly launching into its use as a classroom tool. So, while Facebook and other social networking tools can be great
assets in the classroom, the privacy issues indicate there are still important considerations that need to be addressed.

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