#SprintinginDigitalFootprints:
Using Social Networking Sites and Social Media to Promote Critical Thinking and Engagement in a Middle School Classroom Setting

by

Leigh Ferreira
Bachelor of Arts, University of Victoria, 2008
Post-Degree Professional Program, University of Victoria, 2009

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Supervisory Committee

Dr. Deborah Begoray, Department of Curriculum and Instruction
Supervisor

Dr. Sylvia Pantaleo, Department of Curriculum and Instruction
Departmental Member

Abstract

In consideration of the lack of engagement that currently affects the middle school learning environment as a result of the changing technological society, this Master of Education project focuses on using social media networks and applications to teach critical literacy and critical thinking skills in order to be support students to become responsible contributors and members of society. The project is divided into four main sections: introduction, literature review, unit plan and reflection. The review of the literature resulted in the identification of three main implications for instruction and practice: 1) online literacy must take into consideration students' personal interests and beliefs; 2) it is the role of the teacher to educate themselves in order to scaffold and facilitate learning in new literacy forums; and 3) digital literacy must become a regular part of the school curriculum. The implications resulted in the development of a course and unit plan with the goal of having students learn valuable 21st century skills through project- and inquiry-based learning situations, and to gain a stronger sense of self, as well as a sense of community, both local and global through the focus of digital citizenship and media literacy, focusing specifically of social media. The unit plan includes detailed instructions, print outs, and assessment for instruction in digital literacy. In the fourth chapter I detail the process, based on implications from the literature review, of creating the course and its challenges, and highlight both the personal and professional lessons learned, as well as recommendations for future research.

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this project to my partner, Kevin, and to my parents, Andre and Olinda. Kevin's continuous encouragement, patience and love were able to motivate me through the completion of my course work and this project. To my parents, your endless support for life-long learning and professionalism drive helped inspire me to pursue this achievement.

Chapter 1

Introduction

"Social media is not about the exploitation of technology, but service to community" (Simon Mainwaring, 2011, p. 129).

In the world that we live in, technology is ubiquitous. The majority of students today have been exposed to and involved with various media, whether through maintaining their own websites (combining print, audio, and visuals); creating and editing music and movies; programming computer games; or engaging in hours of offline and online gaming. Moreover, even students without experience in composing multimodal texts often know a great deal about interpreting and interacting with multimodal forums as a result of being bombarded daily with material from magazines, hundreds of cable channels, Netflix, cell phones with text messaging and gaming options, countless social media applications and sites, video games that feature popular music and attempt to recreate film styles, and so on and so on. Many of these media sources are also filled with advertising targeting adolescents. Our students are "digital natives [who] are all 'native speakers' of the digital language of computers, video games and the Internet" (Prensky, 2001, p. 1) and ultimately, "new literacies are transforming the way [they] read, write, think, communicate, and make meaning" (Vacca, Vacca & Mraz, 2014, p. 30). Indeed, "adolescent learners [are] develop[ing] their use of new literacies for personal and social purposes" (Vacca, et al., 2014, p. 32) creating a gap between the "real world" and the classroom learning. With the inundation of technologies available to our students, their interests and the way they learn, have evolved.

Being a teacher at the middle school level, I have observed many deficiencies in the educational system which have not adapted to the new technological world. One of the greatest

areas of concern with this age range of students is a general lack of engagement (Turner, Christensen, Kackar-Cam, Trucano, & Fulmer, 2014, p. 1196) which is a significant factor affecting student learning. Like other researchers, in my experience, this problem is rooted in two fundamental issues: students' short attention spans (Harrison, Vannest, Davis, & Reynolds, 2012) and a general lack of motivation, both intrinsic and extrinsic (Alexander, 2014; Skinner, Kinderman, & Furrer, 2010). Many arguments exist about the source of these issues, ranging from typical characteristics of adolescents within this age range to these concerns being distinct properties of "digital natives."

What I have discovered is that students are clearly motivated to use technology more than traditional teaching approaches even when the output is similar. Whether students' increased motivation is because of their comfort level with technology as "digital natives" or because the use of technology provides students with the locus of control, students are more interested in any learning opportunities which connections with and involves technology (McGrail & Davis, 2011; National Literacy Trust, 2009; Solomon & Schrum, 2007). Technology also provides an opportunity for student-centered investigatory learning opportunities as opposed to teacher-focused instruction. If the application of technology increases student motivation and engagement in the school realm, why, then, are educators not more inclined to integrate the interactive opportunities of social media and its applications in order to improve critical literacy practices and student engagement, motivation and learning?

According to Merriam-Webster's Dictionary, "social media" is defined as "forms of electronic communication (as Web sites for social networking and microblogging) through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content (as videos)" (Social Media, 2015). The appeal of social media is that they provide the

user with aspects of fantasy, control, challenge, curiosity and competition, all of which are aspects that I hope to include in my teaching practice and specifically in the *Ewrite 8* course. I believe that the use of new literacies (online digital and multimodal literacies), mainly interactive social media and applications, can facilitate critical thinking, a necessity for today's Post Millennial student as "the 21st century requires writers who can move easily between genres, thinking critically about new writing tasks, exercise audience awareness, and be able to identify and improve areas of weakness" (NCTE, 2008, p. 4). Therefore, by not embracing and teaching students' "digital wisdom in order to know how to digitally enhance the capacities of the brain and to use the digitally enhanced capacities to find better solutions to the practical problems we face" (Prensky, 2009, p. 1), educators are doing their students a disservice. Furthermore, these experiences with new literacies can be translated to create an effective and constructive classroom environment. These specific types of new literacies enable the user, a teacher or a student who may otherwise be resistant to learning, to be engaged (Andes & Claggett, 2011, p. 345). Interactive games and apps also provide the opportunity for self-discovery (McGonigal, 2010). In addition, in these interactive environments, students are empowered because they "take part in a mix of both individual and collaborative activities" (Vacca, Vacca & Mraz, 2014, p. 32) while "critical[ly] thinking, problem solving and decision making" (p. 38) in order to accomplish the goal of the activity. Also, because these applications are multimodal, the user partakes in experiential learning thus gaining a more in-depth and complex understanding of the material by interacting in multiple modes, "simultaneous[ly] reading, processing and/or producing and interacting with various modes of print, image, movement, graphics, animation, sound, music and gesture" (Walsh, 2009, p. 16). In other words, one learns by doing.

Because the majority of students are using these socially interactive online social media and applications daily with a prominent online audience, it is essential to teach and promote critical thinking skills and critical literacy. Ultimately, "multimodal texts are a powerful means for teaching critical thinking" (Ajayi, 2009, p. 594) and thus students must "learn the meaning-making potential of these [multimodal literacy] modes within different curriculum areas and learn to evaluate and critique these" (Walsh, 2009, p. 13). Having the abilities to raise questions about the writer and the audience for the message and debate the message, are imperative skills as students are being inundated with online information frequently manipulated to persuade young audiences, for example, to buy their products or accept their message.

In addition, using technology and social media connections can "motivate struggling students by providing them with authentic reasons to read and write" (Andes & Claggett, 2011, p. 345). In my experience, students often perceive that they do not know enough to write for a public audience; however, using social media sites, such as Twitter,

> requires such short answers that students are more willing to write something, secure in the knowledge that they aren't allowed long answers. Getting their ideas down improves confidence. Exchanging ideas with others and providing and getting feedback improves their confidence even more. (Solomon & Schrum, 2010, p. 39)

Furthermore, when an authentic audience is provided in a new literacy format, writers are more conscious, reflective and critical of their own process because they know that others are monitoring their progress and providing feedback. Positive feedback and the engagement and motivation from a public forum can both intrinsically and extrinsically encourage the user to progress. Similarly, in a classroom, when "writing lack[s] connection to the real audience because it [i]s addressed to the teacher as the sole reader" (McGrail & Davis, 2011, p. 430),

students are often unmotivated and question the purpose of the task. If a teacher finds an authentic audience for their students to present to, then the question, "Why do I have to do this?" is immediately answered for the student who will now become both intrinsically and extrinsically motivated. The use of technology and online community sites can expedite and ease this forum. Despite the advantages that an online forum may provide, there are obvious potential dangers of exposing middle school students to public audiences. Thus, educators need to not only teach critical thinking, literacy and digital wisdom, but also actively facilitate and monitor the online process.

Statement of Purpose

Educators must be ready and willing to change their practices in order to best suit the needs of their students in the changing technological world. As "the internet is a defining technology for literacy and learning in the twenty-first century" (Leu, 2007, p. 2), teachers must integrate digital as well as print forms in order to meet the changing learning approach of students. Ultimately, "technology alone is not the answer" (Andes & Claggett, 2011, p. 350), but rather a multimodal tool that can motivate and enhance our students' learning processes in all different formats, both traditional and nontraditional, print and digital. By utilizing the tools available to teachers and their students, specifically social media and its applications, educators are motivating, engaging and preparing students for the world in tangible and real-world contexts.

Currently, in School District #23 (Central Okanagan), the initiative is for all students to gain the following skills and to leave the educational system with the "Attributes of a 21st Century Learner" (Babcock & Flannigan, n.d.) in order to be successful in their futures.

A **LEARNER** is one who is engaged, resilient and seeks to understand through:

- Literacy, numeracy and subject competencies

- Information, media, and technology literacy
- Self-direction, work ethic and accountability
- A healthy lifestyle
- Financial literacy

A **THINKER** is one who analyzes, makes connections, inferences, asks questions and transfers knowledge through:

- Critical thinking and problem solving
- Open mindedness and reflection
- Flexibility and adaptability

An **INNOVATOR** is one who sees possibilities and generates original ideas with value through:

- Curiosity and imagination
- Creativity, design and performance
- Initiative and entrepreneurship

A **COLLABORATOR** is one who excels at working with others to create new understanding through:

- Appreciating diversity
- Effective communication
- Interdependence
- Relationship building

A **CONTRIBUTOR** is a citizen who participates in the local and global community through:

- Finding, following and sharing passions
- Respect, empathy, and kindness

- Integrity and ethical behaviour
- Civic and environmental responsibility
- Embracing diverse cultures and lifestyles

By creating a course which focuses on social media not only as a tool and a forum for discussion, but also as a means of analysis, I believe that students will be provided with opportunities to learn the necessary attributes of a 21st century learner identified above. In addition, the course will also follow the goals of the British Columbia Ministry of Education's Plan for Reform (2015) to improve students' communication, critical thinking, creative thinking and innovation, personal responsibility and well-being, as well as students' social responsibility.

Overview of the Project

In this project, which consists of four chapters, I present the use of social media within a middle school classroom. I have titled my project "#Sprinting in Digital Footprints". The use of hashtags in social media provide not only a context for text, but also "there is something immediately gratifying about adding a description to …[what] one is interested in, being able to do so beyond prose sentences and not having to look to an authority for ontological assistance" (Alexander, 2006, p. 36). In the first chapter, I have summarized the importance of addressing the lack of engagement that currently affects the middle school learning environment. I believe that this issue is a result of the changing technological society, I also believe that it is the educator's responsibility to teach critical literacy and critical thinking skills in order to be support students to become responsible contributors and members of society. In the second chapter, I outline the theoretical frameworks, constructivism and social constructivism. I examine the strengths and limitations of integrating social media into the classroom through a review of the literature on adolescents and adolescent literacy, specifically in regards to 21st century education;

multiliteracies; the use of online learning sites and community; critical thinking and critical literacy; middle school student engagement and technology; and the integration of project-based learning in order to improve critical writing and thinking processes and proficiency and to deepen the learning experience.

In the third chapter, I present a unit overview with unit plan of 20 lesson plans for a course with the goal of having students learn valuable 21st century skills through project- and inquiry-based learning situations, and to gain a stronger sense of self, as well as a sense of community, both local and global. The *Ewrite 8* course focuses on digital citizenship and media literacy, focusing specifically of social media. Through the deconstruction of media content, and, more specifically, social networks, students can develop an understanding of how this media content influences culture and how society in turn can influence others. This course is designed to be hands-on and computer-based which will further develop both critical thinking and writing skills.

The fourth chapter features my personal reflection on the process of completing this project, as well as the progression of teaching this new course. I detail the process of creating the course, and highlight both the personal and professional lessons learned. In addition, I connect the research and scholarship discussed in Chapter 2 to the practical application of *Ewrite 8*.

Chapter 2

Review of Literature

The post millennial students that I teach are, and have been, in contact with the world of new technologies, three-dimensionality, video games, online communications and screen and mobile devices for the majority of their lives. This generation is advocating for a different world which moves a faster pace (Burstein, 2014). Living in a multimodal world opens up students to a macrocosm of endless learning possibilities both within and outside the school realm. Since "being a literate person in today's society involves more than being able to construct meaning from a printed text" (Vacca, Vacca & Mraz, 2014, p. 33), teachers need to approach the composing process in ways that encourage other forms of literacy that are relevant to students. Moreover, educators know that "the most important factor influencing learning is what the learner already knows, that teachers should ascertain this, and teaching accordingly" (Ausubel, 196, as cited in William, 2011, p. 3).

A growing disconnection exists "between academic literacies and the literacies students practice outside of schools" (Bruce, 2009, p. 428). While print literacy has been the main skill for academic representation, the texts of the 21st century require teachers to adopt new skills, strategies and pedagogical frameworks to support students' literacy practices. A review of the literature reveals that integrating new technologies and forums, such as social media and online networking communication sites, not only support British Columbia (BC) Education's *Plan for Reform* (2015), but can also promote critical thinking, critical literacy, and student engagement in a social and participatory environment.

As I reviewed the literature on the topic of integrating social media into the middle school classroom in order to promote critical thinking and student engagement, I found it important to

recognize the particular characteristics and learning styles of adolescents in order to understand the nature of a multiple literacies based curriculum approach, and to investigate the importance of social constructivism in a participatory culture and setting such as a middle school educational program. The theories of constructivism and social constructivism provide a framework on which I have based my project. In addition, the literature on the topics of adolescent and adolescent literacy, multiple literacies, critical thinking and critical literacies, and student engagement provides compelling evidence that integrating new literacies into a personalized 21st century middle school curriculum is crucial for future student success.

Theoretical Frameworks

Because middle school education is such a social setting and online social networking sites simply make our social networks visible to others who are not in our immediate network, my project has been influenced by both the conceptual frameworks of constructivism, and especially social constructivism through the work of Piaget, Vygotsky and Bruner.

Constructivism.

Constructivism, as a philosophy of education, asserts that understanding emerges through the "active construction and co-creation of knowledge" (Lincoln & Guba, 2000, p. 176) rather than acquiring it passively, as a whole. Thus, theories of constructivism acknowledge that learning is an ongoing process shaped both through individual experiences as well as social interactions involving language, real world and personal experiences, as well as interaction and collaboration between learners. The founder of constructivism, Jean Piaget (1952), ascertained that children must discover, construct and reconstruct knowledge through a process of meaningful and active reflection. Piaget used the term "schema" to describe these mental structures that adapt and organize according to created patterns. According to Piaget, cognitive

development occurs through the processes of assimilation (the method by which people integrate new patterns into their existing schemata), accommodation (the change of the mental structure to create new or modify old schemata), and equilibration (the force which propels intellectual growth from assimilation to accommodation).

Where constructivism focuses on the individual and how he or she learns, social constructivism emphasizes how meaning and understanding grow out of social encounters.

Social constructivism.

Known for his theory of social constructivism, Lev Vygotsky (1978) established that interaction and discussion directed by an experienced individual facilitates and supports the development of learners' identities as thinkers. In contrast to Piaget, Vygotsky asserted that experienced support, or scaffolding, from a more sophisticated other progressively dissipates as the learner develops an understanding of concepts, and thus becomes more independently able to understand knowledge more deeply. According to Vygotsky (1978), the zone of proximal development (ZPD) refers to the distance between the learner's current ability to problem solve, and the potential ability to solve problems that are beyond the competency of the individual through the guidance of an experienced adult or peer. Learning and development first take place on a social level, and only then, on the individual and intellectual level. First, learning appears between people as an inter-psychological interaction, and then within the individual as an intra-psychological level (Vygotsky, 1978). Thus, learners are able to develop metacognition and a self-understanding of their learning processes (Fisher, 2007). Learning now becomes an active, socially mediated activity (Vygotsky, 1978) to stimulate higher cognitive development. Moreover, in a classroom setting, when situated practice is tied to instruction through peer and other experts, and there is scaffolding rather transmission, this environment leads to productive

learning (Mills, 2006).

Both Piaget and Vygotsky believed that knowledge construction is an active process where the learner gathers, filters, analyzes and reflects on the information provided resulting in more thorough and individualized comprehension. However, unlike Piaget, Vygotsky placed more emphasis on the social context of learning and the role of an active, involved teacher as conduits for the cognitive tools needed for intellectual development. Furthermore, Vygotsky (1962, 1978) emphasized both social and cultural influences on child development, and especially recognized language as the driving force behind cognitive development.

Jerome Bruner, an American psychologist influenced by both Piaget and Vygotsky, furthered the notions that learners actively construct new ideas based upon both current and existing knowledge. Similar to Piaget, Bruner deemed the learner progresses through stages beginning by selecting and transforming the information, constructing hypotheses about that information and eventually making decisions while relying on cognitive structures to do so. Furthermore, Bruner (1986) claimed that "most learning in most settings is a communal activity, a sharing of culture" (p. 127). Bruner's research focused on the interactional context of children's lives and determined that learning occurred in the roles of the child as a member of his or her family, a social group, and a community. Building on Piaget and Vygotsky's works, Bruner conducted extensive research (1986, 1990, 1996) and introduced the concepts of "readiness for learning" and spiral curriculum, which refers to the idea of revisiting basic ideas over and over, building on them, and elaborating to the level of full understanding and mastery. These cognitive processes are only emphasized through the social influence of others.

The social setting of middle school not only provides students opportunities to learn in collaborative environments, but also provides a venue for students to develop as unique

individuals. Below, I discuss the literature regarding adolescents and adolescent literacy, multiliteracies, critical thinking and critical literacies, as well as student engagement and project-based learning in order to provide a basis and rationale for my project.

Conceptual Frameworks

Adolescents and adolescent literacy.

The switch from elementary to middle school coincides with several major changes for adolescents. Most are in the throes of puberty; they are becoming more self-aware and self-conscious; and their thinking is growing more critical and more complex (McEwin & Greene, 2010; National Middle School Association, 2009, 2010; Steinberg, 2011; Wormeli, 2011). During this time of transition, toil and discovery (Adolescent basics, n.d.), adolescents often struggle with traditional academic literacies and styles of instruction, as well as the formats and quantities of texts encountered (Ogle & Correa-Kovtun, 2010). In their article on middle grade reforms, Friend and Thompson (2010) emphasize that middle school education "should be distinctive due to the unique needs of young adolescents" (p. 4). Thus, it is integral that educators understand and address the prevalent issues and struggles with independence and self-identity experienced by adolescents (Adolescence Basics, n.d.; Robb, 2010). Moreover, "recognizing and understanding the unique developmental characteristics … of early adolescence and their relationship to the educational program … and to the structure of the middle school … are central tenets of middle grades education" (National Middle School Association, 2009, p. 1).

Because adolescents deserve educational experiences that recognize their unique intellectual, emotional, psychological and social developmental characteristics and needs, in order to effectively educate adolescents, these learning characteristics should serve as a basis for selecting instructional strategies (McEwin & Greene, 2010; National Middle School Association,

2009). In addition, many North American students today live in a fast-paced world in which literacy demands are expanding, including more reading and writing tasks than ever before. Adolescents need high levels of literacy to understand the vast amount of information available to them, and to fuel their imaginations as they help create the world of the future. Ultimately, a multiple literacies conceptual framework can be effective in meeting the diverse needs of adolescents (Atwell, 1998; Eisner, 2002, 2004; New London Group, 2000; Sheridan-Thomas, 2007; Zoss, 2009).

Multiple literacies.

Multiple literacies encompass the ever-changing world of students' text forms and literacies, both within and outside of the school realm (Alvermann, 2003; Eisner, 2002, 2004; New London Group, 1996; Tierney, Bond & Bresler, 2006; Zoss, 2009). This literary "range of practices involved in the coding of socially and culturally relevant signs and symbols" (Lewis & Del Valle, 2009, p. 309) not only encompasses reading and writing, but also viewing and representing (Ajayi, 2011; Cope, 2009; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003).

According to the Pew Research Center's study (2012) on *Teens and Technology*, fully 95% of American teens are online and thus are constantly and actively engaging with texts in multiple forms (digital, visual, print, and so on.). Many students of today integrate online communication into their everyday existence and it is integral that this non-academic literacy be recognized, integrated and embraced by the school curriculum (Mesch, 2009). Thus, because of students' multifaceted literacy practices, scholars suggest that the goal of educators should be to build upon students' patterns of thought (Allington, 2007; Alvermann, 2003, 2008; Atwell, 1998, 2007). Moreover, research supports the perspective that literacy practices which are relevant, social and part of adolescents' contemporary worlds create successful adolescent literacy

practices and learners (Alvermann, 2008; Eisner, 2002, 2004; National Council of Teachers of English, 2004; National Middle School Association, 2009, 2010; New London Group, 2000; Robb, 2010; Woelders, 2007; Zoss, 2009).

Due to the nature of their unique developmental stage, adolescents need literacy opportunities which connect to their interests, future goals, identities and learning levels (Lawrence, McNeal & Yildilz, 2009; New London Group, 1996; Perry, 2009; Tierney et al., 2006). A multiliteracies approach not only exposes and enables students to utilize and create multiple texts and formats, but also provides students the opportunity to access multiple ways of knowing (Eisner, 2002; Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000; Hansen, 2009). In the 2007 policy brief on multiple literacies, the National Council of Teachers of English concluded that "supported engagement with multiple literacies increases student success and motivation" (p. 1). Thus, the importance of encouraging students to connect their personal and too often hidden literacies, such as technology and online competencies, to their school-based academic literacies (Christensen, 2000; Lewis & Del Valle, 2009; Robb, 2010; Tierney et al., 2006), is necessary in order to avoid students becoming "resistant to school based literac[ies]" (National Council of Teachers of English, 2007, p. 3). Furthermore, the value of a multiliteracies approach to learning for middle years students is evident when considering the point that "no one particular mode (written language, visual, gestural, music, digital, and so on) carries the entire message" (Sanders & Albers, 2010, p. 4).

Research on multiliteracies.

For many adolescent students, being able to make a connection between their hidden out-of-school literacy realm and their public school-based literacy world is integral to making learning connections (Atwell, 1998; Mills, 2010; Walsh, 2009). Recognizing that a textual shift has

occurred for today's students whose "new literacy" (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003) environment is filled with visual, electronic and digital texts, Walsh (2009) researched and analyzed the pedagogical applications of multiliteracies from three case studies focusing on new modes of communication and literacy within the classroom. Working collaboratively with teachers and researchers in primary schools in Sydney, Australia, Walsh (2009) dedicated her research toward determining the literacy strategies students needed for reading, using and producing multimodal texts, as well as the relevant and explicit pedagogy appropriate for integrating multimodal and traditional literacy practices within classroom contexts. Throughout the study, Walsh (2009) found that the interactivity of visual and gestural modes with reading and writing, as well as the convergence of the modes of sound and image with traditional writing (podcasting), and the articulation between written and digital modes (interactive whiteboards and computer movie makers) within the classroom resulted in maximized "literacy and learning" (p. 11) opportunities for students to be engaged visually, kinaesthetically, audibly, and orally. While each case study involved students of different ages and topics, consistency in analysis revealed how these approaches engendered holistic literacy and learning where students of all ages were engaged in highly productive and innovative learning experiences resulting in collaboration and the deeper understanding of curricular concepts.

Conversely, when using traditional approaches to literacy instruction, such as lecturing and pen and paper assignments, teachers are less likely to make use of the experiences students bring with them to school (McDowall, Cameron, Dinglewith, Gilmore, & MacGibbon, 2007) or capitalize on students' ever-increasing out-of-school literacy practices (Hull & Schultz, 2001). Thus, although these multimodal literacy and learning experiences involve a different literacy that teachers may be reluctant to use, Walsh (2009) posits that by finding ways to integrate

multimodal *with* traditional literacy practices, rather than forcing the isolation of one literacy practice or another, pedagogy can be reframed in order to make learning relevant and engaging without completely abandoning classic literacy conventions.

In a similar study, over the course of a two year project in New Zealand focusing on 19 teachers and their students from seven different rural and urban schools ranging from primary to college level, Sandretto and Tilson (2013) investigated how teachers can bridge students' in and out-of-school literacies in order to enhance their critical analysis of multiple types of texts. After conducting multiple interviews with both the teachers and students, as well as analyzing the ethnographies of the in and out-of-school literacy practices of several students and student work samples, Sandretto and Tilson (2013) discovered that by incorporating multimodal texts and using a multiliteracies approach, students took up "a broader understanding" (p. 7) of information by drawing upon not only linguistic codes and conventions, but also visual, audio, gestural and spatial modes of meaning (Cope & Kalantzis, 2006, 2009; New London Group, 1996). The researchers argued that reconceptualizing literacy and corresponding pedagogical practices acknowledges the "increasing cultural and linguistic diversity and rapid changes in communication technologies" (Sandretto & Tilson, 2013, p. 2) thus preparing students for the future. In addition, a multiliteracies perspective supports students' ability to "decode, make meaning, use and critically analyse multiple text types for multiple purposes in diverse contexts" (Sandretto & Tilson, 2013, p. 3), especially those texts experienced in out-of-school contexts. Thus, it is integral that educators bridge the literacies that students use out of school with those literacies used within the school realm in order to develop a pedagogy that is authentic, relevant and engaging (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992) that will in turn facilitate a deeper understanding of concepts.

However, despite all of the didactic advantages that reflect a multiliteracies approach, Sandretto and Tilson (2013) note the continuing resistance of some educators. Students and teachers alike need to constantly reconceptualize what constitutes a text in order to transform their literacy understanding and practices. Sandretto and Tilson (2013) argue that teachers need to not only explicitly teach the associated metalanguage, but also, both "teachers and students need multiple opportunities to [actively] engage with and adopt the metalanguage of multiliteracies" (p. 7), which requires time and the re-education of what it means to learn and to be literate. Moreover, in order to link the in and out-of-school literacy practices, teachers need to draw on students' "funds of knowledge" (Heath, 1973; Moll et al., 1992) and shift pedagogical practices to a more dialogic teaching stance where there is continuous conversation between teacher and student in order to collectively and collaboratively construct meaning. Teachers have a key responsibility to scaffold multimodal literacies and model new technical proficiencies (Mills, 2010). Teachers must "teach digital writing in both face-to-face as well as virtual spaces" (Hicks, 2009, p. 132). Furthermore, it is integral that "technology and writing [...] be seen as intricately intertwined" (Hicks, 2009, p. 134). Teachers must integrate technology not for the sake of simply using electronics, but because it enhances students' writing processes. It is important and necessary that teachers, "understan[d] the affordances and constraints of different digital writing tools, as well as why [they] are employing those tools" (Hicks, 2009, p. 134). Thus, although the emphasis on new literacies of youth in everyday settings is important, the research suggests that not all adolescents are technologically savvy and thus, there needs to be a balance between traditional literacy practices and scaffolded multimodal practices (Andes & Claggett, 2011; Leu et al., 2007; Mills, 2010; Prensky, 2001, 2009; Walsh, 2009).

An online environment can act as an effective learning environment through discussion

forums which can stimulate critical thinking, improve communication skills, foster a sense of community among students, and encourage collaborative problem solving skills.

Online collaborative classrooms.

"For excellence, the presence of others is always required" (Arendt, 1958, p. 36). In our changing technological world, collaboration in social networks is an everyday occurrence. All ages of society are "increasingly using online spaces to collaborate and communicate" (Curwood, Magnifico, & Lammers, 2013, p. 678). Moreover, learning in the digital age is no longer dependent on individual knowledge acquisition; rather, it relies on the connected learning that occurs through interaction with various sources (including the Internet and digital programs) and participation in social networks, and group tasks (Siemens, 2005). Working collaboratively in a virtual community can provide students with "the opportunity and the responsibility to take ownership and manage the content and direction of their learning" (Olivera, Tinoca, & Pereira, 2011, p. 1348). Furthermore, due to students' different learning styles, strengths, and approaches, when working in and creating multimodal formats, students can "produce a text that is richer and more nuanced than [a] single-genre text" (Dean & Grierson, 2005, p. 456) created individually. Thus, "technology use can promote social interaction, peer teaching, and collaboration" (Andes & Claggett, 2011, p. 345). Nonetheless, it still cannot be assumed that the online literacy skills possessed by most students will be transferable to students' online reading comprehension or composing. Exploration and learning in reading and writing needs to be a reciprocal and collaborative process between teacher and student and amongst students themselves. Because

> no individual, such as a teacher, can keep up with the many new literacies that rapidly and continuously appear online … each of us has to depend on others to help us acquire the

> continuously updated literacies of online reading comprehension. (Leu, Zawilinski, Castek, Bannerjee, Housand, Liu, & O'Neil, 2007, p. 39)

Moreover, throughout my teaching practice, and specifically in a middle school classroom, I have experienced how when students are in the presence of others and work through active collaboration, they come to deeper understandings of concepts.

Research on online collaborative classrooms.

In 2010, findings from a national survey in the United States of middle level school students revealed that there was more collaboration in highly successful schools than in a random sample of schools (McEwin & Greene, 2010), further highlighting the need for collaborative practices at the middle school level**.** Guided by Vygotsky's social constructivist theory, Parveen and Batool (2011) conducted a study to explore the effects of cooperative learning on science achievement amongst Grade 9 students from Pakistan. Using the quantitative data from pre and post general science test scores of both an equally distributed traditionally taught control group and a cooperative learning experimental group of students, Parveen and Batool (2011) discovered that "cooperative learning method[s] are superior to traditional method[s] in …[student] achievement" (p. 154). However, Parveen and Batool (2011) recognized that it is important to note that "working together does not necessarily involve cooperation" (p. 154). The research supports the assertion that in order for cooperative learning to be successful, activities and groups need to be carefully structured and teacher facilitated (Miller & Benz, 2008; Wendt & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2014; Yu et al., 2010).

The face-to-face interaction that takes place during collaborative classroom activities can increase social interaction, reflective thinking, and metacognition among students (Miller & Benz, 2008; Parveen & Batool, 2011; Wendt & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2014; Yu et al., 2010);

however, collaborative group work can be fostered and facilitated through online learning forums as web conferencing technology permits collaborative students groups to participate in dialogic exchanges, as they work together to create a knowledgeable discourse community in which they exchange their ideas.

Online learning forums and social networks.

Digital forms of communication have expanded the definitions of literacy (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003) and as suggested by various researchers (Oncu & Cakir, 2011; Wang & Wu, 2008; Wendt & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2014), incorporation of social networking and online learning forums into the classroom can enhance students' literacy practices. According to Khan (1998, 2000), an "online learning environment" is a social and technical system allowing for the synchronous and asynchronous exchange of resources over a communication network surrounding the learner and teacher. Online learning forums enable members to write collaboratively, review each other's work, upload and download documents, start online discussions, and comment on discussion posts while discussing, debating, and reaching consensus. This online approach encouraging collaboration and personal expression of ideas is consistent with social constructivist views of learning and growth (Vygotsky, 1978). Social networking and online learning sites can promote a collaborative, interactive and open environment, while also enabling users to personalize their own space within the social network. In an educational setting, social networking sites also prove beneficial as a bounded network of participants can be created. Moreover, according to their research goals to understand the impact of online learning environments on middle school, high school and university students, Oncu and Cakir (2011) determined that online learning environments can enhance learner engagement and collaboration, promote effective expert facilitation, develop teacher and student self-assessment

techniques, and serve as aids to the design of faculty development programs, all of which ultimately result in learner achievement, engagement and retention (pp. 1105).

Research on online learning forums and social networks.

Directed by Vygotsky's social constructivism principles, Wendt and Rockinson-Szapkiw (2014) researched the effects of online collaborative learning on middle school students' science literacy. Participants included 84 Grade 8 students who attended a public school in Virginia. Over a nine week period, the control group engaged in collaborative face-to-face activities whereas students in the experimental group participated in online collaborative activities using an online educational platform (Edmodo). With a focus on curricular misconceptions in science literacy, quantitative and quasi-experimental data from students were analyzed from pre and post test results. Although some learners found online collaborative activities to be more difficult than face-to-face group situations, findings from the study indicated that technological advancements provided opportunities to enhance student literacy as learning activities become more "effective and efficient" (Wendt & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2014, p. 1105). Moreover, because the integrated online forum fostered and "accurately mimic[ed] the activities that real scientists do in the scientific world … [such as] collaboration, sharing of ideas, critical analysis, argumentation, and discourse" (Wendt & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2014, p. 1098) student learning was enhanced. Wendt and Rockinson-Szapkiw (2014) suggested, however, that educators moderate their use of online educational environments as certain types of activities may be better suited for online collaborative learning than others. It is also necessary for teachers to scaffold the process to ensure that students can self-regulate their processes (Wendt & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2014, p. 1105).

In a similar study, Leu et al. (2014) investigated the differences between the achievement gap for online reading ability based on income inequality and the achievement gap in traditional, offline reading. Participants included Grade 7 students from both an economically advantaged, privileged school and an economically challenged middle class school in Connecticut. Extensive quantitative data were collected from two online research and comprehension assessments evaluating the skills areas of locating, evaluating, synthesizing and communicating information. As well, data were collected on students' knowledge about two domains in science, prior domain knowledge, and student responses to a questionnaire regarding Internet use at school and at home. In addition, researchers used standardized state reading and writing tests as a basis for students' offline literacy skills. The data analysis revealed a large achievement gap in offline reading comprehension; the students attending the economically advantaged school had a significantly higher reading comprehension level than those students from the economically challenged school. These results were also consistent when it came to the achievement gap in online research and comprehension; however, Leu et al. (2014) asserted that it is important to note that students in both schools performed "at a low level during these online research and comprehension tasks" (p. 53), which raises an important concern about student online learning. Despite the fact that many students grow up in an online world and use several forms of multimodal technology in at home, they are not necessarily skilled in online information use (Leu et al., 2014). Thus, the role of teachers is integral with respect to scaffolding and ensuring that all students develop the skills and receive preparation to engage in online learning that will be vital for future success. Furthermore, the results of this study suggest that instruction in online research and comprehension is important to include in literacy instruction in all curriculum, especially as reading continues to shift from page to screen (Leu et al., 2014).

Ultimately, when students are given opportunities to actively contribute in multifaceted and comprehensive ways in collaborative classroom discourse, they can explore their understanding and awareness of knowledge process and concepts. Moreover, students learn to investigate and practice new ways of using language as a tool for constructing knowledge through peer comments and feedback, thus improving their performance (Wang & Wu, 2008). However, the adoption and implementation of technology needs to be used with caution. Because, for example, an online collaborative forum is multimodal, students are no longer communicating "directly and immediately in synchronous learning" (Wendt & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2014, p. 1112), thus feedback can be "limited to a one-way channel with delayed feedback" (p. 1112). Therefore, effective learning in an online environment depends upon how the interaction is facilitated. The onus is on the teacher to initiate and foster this process. Teachers cannot just assume that by putting students in collaborative online group situations to discuss concepts that their dialogue will lead to depth of understanding.

Because of the inception of interactive technologies and their educational benefits, using these platforms within the classroom enable students to have "a chance at a much richer, much more participatory way of learning and interacting with the world" (Palfrey & Gasser, 2001, pp. 200-201). While incorporating and monitoring online learning forums may entail more work than in a brick-and-mortar classroom, as getting students to use technology appropriately may be a challenge, doing so can increase student knowledge retention (Melkun, 2012; Oncu & Cakir, 2011). Additionally, as online learning participatory culture can encourage creativity and collaboration (Colwell, Hutchinson & Reinking, 2012; Jenkins et al., 2006), it is necessary that literacy educators also view integrating interactive technology, specifically online forums, as an opportunity and a necessity to teach the critical thinking skills of online media which can

develop students' proficiency in analyzing, synthesizing and evaluating when they both encounter and create multimodal texts, as well as during online group discussions (NCTE, 2008).

Critical thinking and critical literacy.

According to *The Foundation for Critical Thinking* (Paul & Elder, 2008), critical thinking is defined as a "mode of thinking – about any subject, content, or problem – in which the thinker improves the quality of his or her thinking by skillfully analyzing, assessing, and reconstructing it" (p. 4). Educational professor Michael Scriven and philosopher Richard Paul (2008) add that critical thinking is this "intellectually disciplined process [that involves] actively … synthesizing and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experimentation, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action" (para. 2). Thus, common definitions emphasize that critical thinking is active rather than passive and is a higher-order thought process. A critical thinker is one who "questions the author and the text, examines information or ideas based on what is included and what is left out, and reflects upon the change that transpires within himself or herself as a result of this process" (McLeod & Vasinda, 2008, p. 261). Moreover, "to be critically literate, readers must come to understand that texts are not 'true' but rather that they represent the perspectives of the writer and the socio-cultural times in which they were written" (Lapp & Fisher, 2010, p. 159). Thus, whereas critical thinking focuses on claims and their support, as well as interpretations and applications, critical literacy and pedagogy have a skeptical and political orientation that focuses on relationships.

Critical pedagogy.

According to Paulo Freire (1970), critical pedagogy provides students with the opportunity to read, write, and learn for themselves. This process enables learners to engage in a culture of questioning and analyzing that demands further competencies than rote learning and acquired

skill application. Thus, personal pupil experiences become a valuable resource, enabling students to relate their narratives to the delivered curriculum resulting in the development of broader knowledge and understanding. In addition, as students collaboratively advance their knowledge and skills, they influence the class environment cultivating individual and group cognition (Reznitskaya & Gregory, 2013). Ultimately, according to Freire (1970), critical pedagogy is about challenging the outside world and offering a way of thinking beyond the seemingly natural or inevitable state of things through creation and transformation of information. Students do not have to necessarily create new information, but rather they need to be able to challenge some intellectual concept in order to think critically (Reznitskaya & Gregory, 2013).

Freire believed that curriculum should be created through dialogue between teachers and student. As such, learning and "true and authentic education" (Freire, 1970, p. 160) will occur only when educators and pupils work collaboratively to interpret the world and society in a "dialogical" manner. This dialogic teaching process of using continuous dialogue between teacher and student, and facilitating dialogue between student and student offers an effective means to aid students in their development of ideas, and in overcoming any concept and process misconceptions, in addition to promoting critical thinking. Dialogic teaching practices provide opportunities for intellectual openness and possibilities for critique and creative thought (O'Connor & Michaels, 2007) because the majority of the focus is on student-to-student discourse where the teacher acts as a facilitator, mediating questioning versus stating ideas. Moreover, "students are encouraged to question, confront, criticize and adopt their own informed positions on issues affecting themselves and/or the world, and to hone their acquired skills and

consciousness through imagining themselves in the lives of others" (Lankshear & Knobel, 2009, p. 69).

Like Freire, Henry Giroux (1997), believes in the importance of critical thinking within the classroom. The role of the educator, he maintains, is to learn from students, appreciate their viewpoints and to participate in the dialogical process. According to Giroux (1997), by generating classroom conditions that facilitate and promote critical thinking opportunities, teachers enable students to become cultural producers who can rewrite their own experiences and perceptions. Moreover, teachers should also encourage collaborative environments where students learn from each other, theorizing and understanding how to question the world around them both within outside the classroom realm. Both Freire (1970) and Giroux (1997) agree that education and educational leaders are transformative; teachers need the knowledge and skill to critique the existing societal inequalities, and to cultivate and impart these aptitudes in order to empower students to be active participants in society. Thus, critical thinking skills not only prepare students for the future, but also bring about the possibility for social and political change and in today's society, background information and facts can be found at the click of a mouse; therefore, teachers need to focus time and energy into teaching all students the skills to think critically and consider the relevancy and bias of information. The purpose of education is learning to think (Dewey, 1993) and students need to learn how to critically evaluate sources, for, as the research suggests, it is not the information that is difficult to track, it is the ability to apply critical evaluating, inferential reasoning, self-regulation skills and affective variables related to efficacy and motivation (Coiro, 2007).

Research on critical thinking skills within the classroom.

Kettler (2014) conducted a study which investigated the critical thinking skills of upper-level gifted and general education elementary school students across three different schools in Texas in order to determine whether critical thinking skill levels should be considered when designing differentiated learning experiences. All data were collected quantitatively, and no qualitative records were amassed from working directly with participants. Quantitative data were collected from the test scores of the 45 identified gifted students and 163 general education students from the Cornell Critical Thinking Test and the Test of Critical Thinking. In addition, Kettler gathered demographic data for each student including cognitive ability scores, academic achievement scores, ethnicity, gender, and information regarding qualifications of being gifted and talented, and economically disadvantaged. Kettler (2014) determined that critical thinking skills are not only present in Grade 4 students, but also that there are significant differences in critical thinking skill development. Furthermore, analyses of the data suggested that the amount of time that students were in a gifted program correlated with critical thinking skill development. This findings of this descriptive study indicated a relationship between critical thinking skills and cognitive ability, as identified gifted students demonstrated advanced critical thinking skills compared with general education students. Thus, teachers need to implement critical thinking opportunities for students of all abilities, and "respond to students' advanced levels of critical thinking skills with differentiated learning experiences based on a scope and sequence of critical thinking skills and applications" (Kettler, 2014, p. 7). Ultimately, critical thinking opportunities should be integrated and facilitated across all curricula beginning early in students' educational careers because, as this research suggests, students are not only prepared to use critical thinking skills, but are also capable.

Correspondingly, in a case study by Groenke and Maples (2008) sought to investigate a teacher's facilitation of critical talk about literature in online discussions with Grade 8 students who attended an urban middle school in East Tennessee. Transcripts from multiple online teacher facilitated class discussions, as well as teacher written reflections served as the primary and secondary data sources. Guided by Lewison, Flint and Van Suys's (2002) "Four Dimensions of Critical Literacy" (disrupting the commonplace, interrogating multiple viewpoints, focusing on sociopolitical issues, and taking action and promoting social justice) as a scheme to analyze the data inductively, Groenke and Maples (2008) found that students, without prompts, were engaging in critically-minded discussions, both posing and initiating questions on their own. Furthermore, Groenke and Maples (2008) determined that the teacher encouraged collaborative critical thinking processes by validating student ideas through requesting student opinions, as well as sharing her own. By participating in the discussions and positioning herself as an equal and co-participant, the educator was able to both create and support critical thinking opportunities for her students. This research further demonstrates that the teacher's role in the critical thinking process is an essential component. However, Groenke and Maples (2008) also observed that when the teacher posed a new question that did not build or extend on the critical talk that had been developed by the students, conversation seemed to cease. Thus, despite the educator's collaborative role in the facilitation, critical discussions emerged and were fostered from the students' own questions and curiosities.

Another issue that emerged during the study was that at times critical conversations were halted because the educator believed she needed "to keep [students] on topic …[to] get everything covered" (Groenke & Maples, 2008, p. 12). Lyle (2008) advises that in order to encourage students to think more deeply and critically, educators need to suspend their own

views and opinions and allow students' voices to be heard over their own, to which many teachers may feel reluctant to lose that authority within the classroom. Ultimately, teachers must approach the organization of an educational program with "the present, existential, concrete situation, reflecting the aspirations of the people [that they teach]" (Freire, 1970, p. 162), especially since children do not naturally engage in sustained intellectual inquiry, nor do speaking and listening necessarily lead to learning (Fisher, 2007). Thus, a teacher may maintain dialogic teaching and critical thinking practices even though he or she is the central locus of power and knowledge in the classroom (O'Connor & Michael, 2007) when he or she acts as a facilitator, making connections between ideas that the students do not see (Fisher, 2007; Lyle, 2008). The teacher in the dialogic classroom is still seen by the students as the content expert who can guide and inform, but also as someone who is continuing to learn (O'Connor & Michaels, 2007; Reznitskaya & Gregory, 2013); thus, status between teacher and student is equalized eliminating tension between those with different levels of power (Freire, 1970).

For many students, the curricula of today's schools seem irrelevant to their lives, but by developing critical thinking skills, they can evaluate their personal worlds and become healthy skeptics and discerning citizens (Summers, 2000). In order to reach in-depth comprehension of material, higher level thinking processes should be included to create structure to integrate multiple forms of literacy into lifelong learning in all realms. Teaching critical literacy is no longer an option or simply an isolated component of a literacy program. It is essential for students to become critical thinkers and producers of new knowledge if they are to see themselves as stakeholders in the future (Booth, 2008). Thus, by incorporating critical thinking and literacies into classroom pedagogy, students can become engaged and involved in their education.

Student engagement.

According to *The Glossary of Education Reform* (Abbott et al., 2014), student engagement refers to the degree of attention, curiosity, interest, optimism, and passion that students show when they are learning or being taught that extends to the level of outward motivation needed in order to progress in their education. The concept of student engagement is predicated on the fact that learning improves when students are inquisitive, interested, or inspired and education tends to suffer when students are otherwise disengaged. Moreover, engagement helps to develop habits of mind that broaden students' capacity for continuous learning and personal development (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt & Associates, 2005). It is also important to note, that disengagement typically becomes a concern with students at the middle school and high school levels (Willms, Friesen & Milton, 2009). This construct of student engagement in British Columbia is ubiquitously incorporated not only into district plans, but the British Columbia Ministry of Education's Plan for Reform (2015), with the hopeful intention of enhancing students' abilities to learn how to learn and to become lifelong learners in the ever-changing world.

According to Willms et al. (2009), who suggest that "less than one-half of Canadian students are deeply engaged in their study of school subjects" (p. 17), there are three dimensions of student engagement: behavioural social engagement in which students feel a sense of belonging and participation in school life; academic engagement in which students participate in the formal requirements of schooling, often measured in levels of academic achievement; and cognitive intellectual engagement in which students have a serious emotional and cognitive investment in learning, using higher-order thinking skills (such as analysis and evaluation) to increase understanding, solve complex problems, or construct new knowledge. The goal of education to a successful teacher should be to achieve all of the dimensions of social engagement.

The goal of education, in Bruner's terms (1979), is to achieve a "disciplined understanding" (p. 122) rather than performance. Bruner postulated that the academic disciplines and topics have a tendency to arouse curiosity. Furthermore, he deemed that "interest can be created and stimulated" (Bruner, 1979, p. 117). Thus, academic subjects can have intrinsic attraction, and do not always have to be related to students' daily experiences in order to create engagement. Moreover, Bruner (1977) believed that "intellectual activity anywhere is the same, whether at the frontier of knowledge or in a third-grade classroom" (p. 14). Thus, when students are given freedom to express their ideas in new and creative ways that are relevant to them, such as social media, video games, apps, and animation, they are more likely to be engaged and motivated. Similarly, Guthrie (2000) believes that engaged students merge motivation and thoughtfulness. These engaged students seek to understand, are mastery oriented, intrinsically motivated, and have self-efficacy because they believe in their abilities (Guthrie, 2000). As a result, Guthrie asserts, student engagement strongly correlates to student academic achievement.

Furthermore, the research supports that teachers and teaching are integral to student engagement (Bruner, 1977; Bryson & Hand, 2007; Guthrie, 2001; Kuh et al, 2005; Laird & Kuh, 2005; Mearns et al, 2007). If a teacher is perceived to be approachable, well-prepared, and sensitive to student needs, students will be committed to work more diligently and express personal opinions (Mearns et al., 2007). Moreover, Bryson and Hand (2007) concluded that teachers need to establish and facilitate inviting learning environments, demand high standards, challenge student perceptions, and be willing and available to discuss student progress in order to promote student engagement. In addition, teacher facilitation is all the more critical when integrating technology and social media into the classroom. Ultimately, engagement with technology is positively associated with academic challenge, active and collaborative learning,

teacher-student interaction and in-depth learning experiences and opportunities (Junco, Heibergert & Loken, 2010; Laird & Kuh, 2005).

Research on student engagement using technology within the classroom.

Many North American students of today are immersed in multimodal and collaborative technology which they use on a daily basis to communicate, entertain themselves, socialize and clarify concepts not understood in classroom (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005). Thus, by incorporating students' out-of-school literacy practices and by providing students with authentic reasons to read and to write, they can become more active learners. In a semester-long experimental study, Junco, Heibergert and Loken (2010) sought to determine if using an online microblogging and social networking platform (Twitter) for educationally relevant purposes would impact college student engagement and grades. While the participants in this study were much older than middle school students, the findings of this study are relevant because the research focused on the educational integration of the social networking forum, Twitter, which is relevant, popular, and prominent today. Moreover, because I intend to incorporate social networking platforms like Twitter into my classroom, the study is of particular significance.

Participants in this study included 125 mixed gender first year pre-health majors between the ages of 17 and 20 who attended a university in Pennsylvania. The experimental group was comprised of 70 students who used Twitter for various types of academic and co-curricular discussions and the remaining 55 students acted as the control group. None of the students in the experimental group had used Twitter before participating in the study; they received an hour-long training session on how to use the social networking platform. Throughout the semester, students used Twitter for academic support and classroom discussions regarding subject material and books, on a low-stress question platform, for class and campus event reminders, and so on.

In order to gather quantifiable data regarding student engagement, a 19-item Likert scale based on the National Survey of Student Engagement was distributed to participants. Survey questions included demographic items and items inquiring about students' technology use. Additionally, to assess differences in engagement and grades, researchers were given permission to access students' academic records to obtain grade point averages. Junco et al. (2010) used mixed effects analysis of variance models (ANOVA) to analyze the data. According to the data analysis, student use of Twitter in educationally relevant ways had a positive effect on student engagement and on student academic achievement. In addition, the results revealed that students not only were motivated and engaged with course content, but also with each other as they were actively involved in thoughtful and personally meaningful conversations via Twitter. Ultimately, Junco, et al. (2010) ascertained that using Twitter in an educational setting improved contact between students and faculty by providing a forum for contact congruent with their digital lifestyles; encouraged cooperation and collaboration among classmates; promoted active learning; allowed for prompt feedback; maximized time on task; and extended and deepened learning beyond the assigned class time.

Junco et al. (2010) noted that while "Twitter facilitated communication, engagement, and the democratization of roles and relationships" (p. 130) within the classroom, the use of Twitter also demanded that two faculty members regularly and actively monitor and participate. Thus, it is necessary that when implementing social networking forums in the classroom, the teacher must be a participant in order to increase the students' sense of connection and accountability. Furthermore, the integration of social media into classroom pedagogy depends on "considerable creative involvement from the teachers" (Crook, 2008, p. 35), for, if a teacher is actively engaged in the process, which is necessary to engender student engagement, feedback loops can be very

time consuming. Furthermore, as Sutherland, Robertson and John (2008) remark, teachers may fear that when introducing a new technology into classroom pedagogy, it will not work or may waste class time in attempts to ensure proper functioning. Additionally, due to the potentially negative impact of technological difficulties on student attention, educators may be reluctant to integrate technological innovations and social networking sites. Thus, it is also important that educators have tested and are comfortable with the technological forums themselves, and have technological support readily available, if necessary. Another potential educator hurdle with integrating online social networking sites was demonstrated in Cole's (2009) research on the integration of Wiki technology to increase student engagement. She noted in her research that students were hesitant to try new activities, such as using online social networking forums, when they were not able to draw an immediate connection with the curriculum. Therefore, it is necessary that when educators introduce a new literacy into the classroom, especially one that is typically seen as non-traditional and non-educational such as social networks, that appropriate scaffolding is provided, and that educational links are made clear, not only for the students, but also for the teaching staff and administration (Cole, 2009).

Despite online social networking forums being "a supplement that engages students in the content and provides an avenue for [students] to learn difficult concepts of the real world in an environment in which they are comfortable" (Annetta et al., 2008, p. 236), ultimately, social media and online technology should not be seen as a primary method for improving student learning. Furthermore, social networks in the classroom are not "a replacement for good teaching" (Annetta et al., 2008, p. 236). Instead, educators' focus would be better placed on providing differentiated instruction, giving curriculum personal relevance by integrating students' out-of-school literacy practices, using a variety of multimodal media, and improving

assessment practices. Although all of these aims can be achieved when using social networks within the classroom, research (Annetta et al., 2008; Cole, 2009; Crook, 2008) has revealed that certain factors need to be addressed when implementing online based networks into learning.

Through the integration of project-based learning pedagogy into the classroom, educators can achieve this balance between traditional literacy practices and those that incorporate differentiated learning, critical thinking practices, multimodal creations, collaboration, and overall, a relevant curriculum for students. Furthermore, by providing students with these opportunities, educators are instilling the necessary skills to be lifelong learners.

Project-based learning (PBL).

According to the Buck Institute for Education (BIE) (2003), project-based learning is "a systematic teaching method that engages students in learning knowledge and skills through an extended inquiry process structured around complex authentic questions and carefully designed products and tasks" (p. 4). The BIE (2015), a founding PBL research organization, determined the following eight bolded essentials of project-based learning: **key knowledge, understanding and success skills** are the central focus of a project and learning material focuses on the key content standards and key concepts central to one (or more) curriculum; the **driving question or challenging problem** creates the context and purpose for learning of the project and focuses on important issues, debates, challenges or problems; **sustained inquiry and innovation** is maintained throughout the entirety of the project as students engage in a rigorous, extended process of asking questions, finding resources and applying information using 21st century competencies such as critical thinking, problem solving, collaboration, and various forms of communication in order to construct a new idea, interpretation, or product; the project features a real-world **authentic** context, tasks and tools, quality standards or impact that address students'

personal concerns, interests and issues; **student voice and choice** are key as students make choices, and express their learning using their own voice; both students and teachers engage in individual and group **reflection** on learning, the effectiveness of their inquiry, project activities, as well as challenges and solutions in order to improve the quality of the products they create; students **critique and revise,** learning to provide and use feedback to improve both their process and product; and students present their work publically or to an **authentic public audience** beyond the classroom (Larmer & Mergendoller, 2015, p. 1)**.** Essentially, the idea underlying PBL is to engage students in their learning by encouraging them to investigate their passions and "create projects that result in meaningful learning experiences" (Wurdinger et al., 2007, p. 151).

Research on PBL.

In a study examining how middle school science teachers implemented a multimedia-enriched PBL environment, Lui et al. (2012) determined that the PBL program addressed the teachers' curricular needs, and the implementation had campus administrative and technical support; it aligned with teachers' pedagogical beliefs; it offered a new way of teaching and promoted the development of problem-solving skills; and it challenged students in a captivating manner and supports the learning needs of all students (pp. 8-14). Ultimately, "when students [are] given significant input into their own learning, pupils take ownership of it, demonstrating a student-centered approach to teaching" (Harris, 2010, p. 146) resulting in student engagement. In addition, Lui et al. (2012) found that when students investigated their passions using PBL and were "provided with … opportunit[ies] to pursue active and independent learning" (p. 55), the science teachers embraced the role of a facilitator, thus passing the responsibility to students to learn and transfer skills to areas in their life outside of school.

Through the use of action research, Johnson and Delawsky (2013) sought to determine how PBL influenced students' behavioural, cognitive, and emotional engagement in a British Columbian secondary school Grade 11 Chemistry class. Although the participants in this study were older than students at the middle school level, this research is relevant because not only is it a Canadian study, but also the setting is a public school in British Columbia and therefore reflects current provincial education, students and teachers. Furthermore, in my experience, students at the middle school level have not had much experience in PBL environments. The Grade 11 participants in this study had no experience with PBL, thus the findings from this study are pertinent to my project.

Comparing 25 Grade 11 students' behavioural, cognitive and emotional engagement during two different Chemistry units (one using PBL and the other without), Johnson and Delawsky (2013) collected quantitative data during both units by means of checklists and Likert surveys to self-assess personal engagement, as well as attendance records and test results. Analysis of data revealed that students were often behaviourally engaged in both units; however, because the traditionally-taught non-PBL unit resulted in a test, students tended to be more on task to ensure that valuable information was not missed that may appear on the unit's summative evaluation (Johnson & Delawsky, 2013, p. 564). Additionally, analysis of data regarding cognitive engagement data showed that although students perceived that they learned less due to the fact that there were far fewer formal lectures, increased collaborative group work, and freedom to investigate information with their peers, student test results showed that students had higher scores on the PBL unit test than they did on the non-PBL unit test (Johnson & Delawsky, 2013, p. 565). Moreover, students were still held accountable for their use of time by having individual and group conferences. Despite survey data indicating that students believed there were no

differences in cognitive engagement between the two units, test results indicated otherwise. Results also indicated that students felt "often" emotionally engaged during the PBL unit (Johnson & Delawsky, 2013). Lastly, because PBL is a newer educational pedagogy, researchers speculated that students may have felt resistant to readily delve into the PBL format. As Johnson and Delawsky (2013) noted, students "did not enjoy the work completed during the PBL unit as much" (p. 566). This change in pedagogy may be somewhat stressful for some students as the onus and responsibility for learning and collecting information is focused on them. Furthermore, Johnson and Delawsky (2013) observed that some students were also apprehensive to take risks and be creative for fear that they were not completing the tasks "correctly" (p. 566). Therefore, it is integral for teachers to actively and clearly scaffold the PBL process for students, as well as provide timely and frequent feedback in order to ensure that students are comfortable in the process.

Conclusions

> "The best any educator can do is to at least consider and test whether integrating social media into their courses makes a difference" (Noor & Hendrick, 2012, p. 71).

In this chapter I provided an overview of the scholarly research and academic theories related to the decisions made to incorporate technology, but more specifically online social networking forums, within the classroom in order to promote critical thinking and student engagement. I considered research that documented the possible challenges faced by students and educators when integrating these online forums. More importantly, however, I presented some scholarship that showcased the advantages of creating a positive classroom environment which facilitates teacher-student relationships, collaboration, critical thinking, and student engagement. Based on the research and the implications for teacher practice, the goal of my

project was to create a course in which critical thinking and student engagement could be promoted using social networking forums within the classroom.

Although the lesson plans in the following chapter were created as a portion of an isolated course, *Ewrite 8*, which was designed with the previous goals in mind, critical thinking, student engagement and digital citizenship are goals which, as the research suggests, all teachers across all curricula should integrate into their everyday teaching practices.

Chapter 3

Ewrite 8 Unit Plan

Introduction

This chapter features a 20 class period project-based learning unit that I created for my created *Ewrite* course. My hope and intent is that this unit can also be used as an integration of digital citizenship instruction into other Grade 8 curricula. I begin by providing an overview of the course and its goals. Next, I discuss the *Ewrite* course's learning outcomes. Because this course is a new creation, I have extracted prescribed learning outcomes from the 2013 British Columbia Ministry of Education's Digital Literacy Competencies, as well as from the British Columbia Ministry of Education's (2013) draft and current (2007) English Language Arts curriculum documents. I then present 20 detailed lesson plans which feature necessary materials, preparation, and instruction points. Finally, I include a formal course overview, supplementary handouts, rubrics and PowerPoint presentation slides to enhance course instruction.

Overview

Subject: Ewrite / Digital Citizenship

Grade: 8

Total Time: 20 class periods

During this course, students will learn valuable 21st century skills through Project and Inquiry-based learning situations. Students will gain a stronger sense of self, as well as a sense of both local and global community. *Ewrite 8* will focus on digital citizenship and media literacy, focusing specifically on social media. Media Literacy is a way of thinking about the media; a way of deconstructing media messages to gain more control over them. Digital Literacy is the interest, attitude and ability of individuals to appropriately use digital technology

and communication tools to access, manage, integrate, analyze and evaluate information, construct new knowledge, create, and communicate with others (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2013). During this course, students will be merging the two, deconstructing media content - apps, photographs, newspaper articles, advertisements, TV shows, movies, documentaries, public relations materials, websites, and more specifically, social networks - and developing an understanding of how the media content influences students and how they in turn can influence others. In addition, students will be watching pod casts, YouTube clips, reading editorials and stories, and reviewing how to think and write critically. This course is designed to be an active, practical and computer-based curriculum which will further develop both students' critical thinking and writing skills. Students will also be working as an online community, working, collaborating and commenting on each other's ideas and opinions through online class discussion forums using Edmodo™.

This unit plan is a portion of the *Ewrite 8* course and has been created to help teachers across content areas implement new literacies and digital citizenship into their practice.

Learning Outcomes

In order to develop the learning outcomes for this course, I examined the 2013 British Columbia Ministry of Education's Digital Literacy Competencies. Drawn from the International Society for Technology in Education (2007), the British Columbia Ministry (2013) identifies six digital literacy competencies:

1. **Research and Information Fluency** - Students apply digital tools to gather, evaluate and use information.

2. **Critical Thinking, Problem Solving, and Decision Making** - Students use critical thinking skills to plan and conduct research, manage projects, solve problems, and make informed decisions using appropriate digital tools and resources.

3. **Creativity and Innovation** - Students demonstrate creative thinking, construct knowledge, and develop innovative products and processes using technology.

4. **Digital Citizenship** - Students understand human, cultural, and societal issues related to technology and practice legal and ethical behavior.

5. **Communication and Collaboration** - Students use digital media and environments to communicate and work collaboratively, including at a distance, to support individual learning and contribute to the learning of others.

6. **Technology Operations and Concepts** - Students demonstrate a sound understanding of technology concepts, systems, and operations.

In addition, learning outcomes were also selected from the British Columbia Ministry of Education's (2013) Draft English Language Arts Curriculum (BCEDELAC). By deconstructing media content, social networks, and applications, students will "explor[e] a rich diversity of texts [which can] deepen [their] understanding and develo[p] [their] ability to make connections, express ideas, and think critically" (BCEDELAC, 2013, Big Ideas). Additionally, students will be able to "develop the following curricular competencies using oral written and visual digital texts" (BCEDELAC, 2013, Curricular Competencies) to:

Comprehend and Connect

- Making meaningful personal connections with ideas presented in a variety of texts to increase understanding, self and others

- Engaging actively as readers and listeners to construct meaning, deepen thinking and comprehension, and promote inquiry
- Critically engaging with text
- Analyzing the ways that language can be manipulated for specific purposes
- Analyzing the accuracy, reliability, and relevance of information

Create and Communicate

- Presenting ideas and information and adjust point of view, voice, and tone for a variety of purposes
- Developing and defending a position with supporting evidence
- Assessing and adjusting communication to improve its clarity, effectiveness and impact

A list of all the British Columbia Education's draft curriculum (2013) for Kindergarten to Grade 9 and each subject area can be found at <https://curriculum.gov.bc.ca/curriculum>.

This unit plan also addresses several of the British Columbia's Ministry of Education's Prescribed Learning Outcomes (PLOs) for the English Language Arts Grade 8 curriculum (2007). The PLOs listed below are not exhaustive, but they have been selected because they can closely be connected to integrating social networks and online educational forums into the classroom. A complete list of all the PLOs for each grade and each subject area can be found at <http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/irp/plo.php>.

English Language Arts 8

Purposes (Reading and Viewing)

- View, both collaboratively and independently, to comprehend a variety of visual texts, such as broadcast media, web sites, film and video, visual components of media

Thinking (Reading and Viewing)

- interpret and **analyze** ideas and information from **texts,** by
    - making and supporting judgments
    - examining and comparing ideas and elements within and among **texts**

Strategies (Writing and Representing)

- select and use a range of strategies to generate, develop, and organize ideas for writing and representing, including
- making connections
- setting a purpose and considering audience
- gathering and summarizing ideas from personal interest, knowledge, and inquiry
- setting class-generated criteria
- create thoughtful representations that communicate ideas and information to
- explore and respond
- record and describe
- explain and persuade
- engage

Below I describe the instructional plan of the project-based unit based on social media applications that I designed and implemented for the *Ewrite* 8 course.

Lesson 1: Introduction

Materials

- Photocopies (class set)
    - Course Outline
    - Getting to Know You Sheet
    - Lo Tech Social Network
- Butcher Paper (enough to cover a substantial wall in the classroom)
- Markers (a different colour for each student)
- Sticky Notes (one for each student)

Resources

Gray, D., Brown, S., & Macanufo, J. (2010). *Gamestorming: A playbook for innovators, rulebreakers, and changemakers.* Sebastopol, CA: O'Reilly.

Instruction

1. Course Outline and Expectations
    - Review course outline and expectations with class
    - Due to the online nature of the course and the regulations specified in the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act (FOIPPA) and the School Act, the parents/guardians of each student in the class must authorize the disclosure of personal information for purposes ancillary to educational programs that will be used in class (Edmodo™, SurveyMonkey, and so on)

2. "Getting to Know You"
    - Have students complete informational sheet
    - To be taken home and reviewed with their parents or guardians

3. Social Network(s) Defined
    - As a class, brainstorm the meaning of "social networks"
    - Co-create a definition as a class and post it on Edmodo™

4. Lo Tech Social Network (adapted from *Gamestorming*)
    - The objective is to introduce students to each other by co-creating a mural-sized, visual network of their connections
    - Describe to the class that as a group, they are going to build the social network that is in the room right now. Point out which wall is going to be used to do it. But first, they need to create the most fundamental elements of the network: who they are.
    - Distribute the hand out and have students answer questions regarding their likes, internet usage, so on on the sheet. Students should also draw an avatar and create two "tags" to represent themselves.
        - For the avatar, explain that this drawing does not need to be an accurate portrayal of themselves; students may use symbols, create alternate versions of themselves, etc.
    - Make connections. Have students come to the wall and "upload" their profiles by taping them up randomly.
    - Provide each student with a different coloured marker. Have students find the people that they know and draw lines to make the connections.
        - Have students label the lines if they can: “friends with” or “went to elementary school with” or “same birth month”, etc. Continue this process for a time and is likely to result in previously undiscovered links and new friends will emerge.

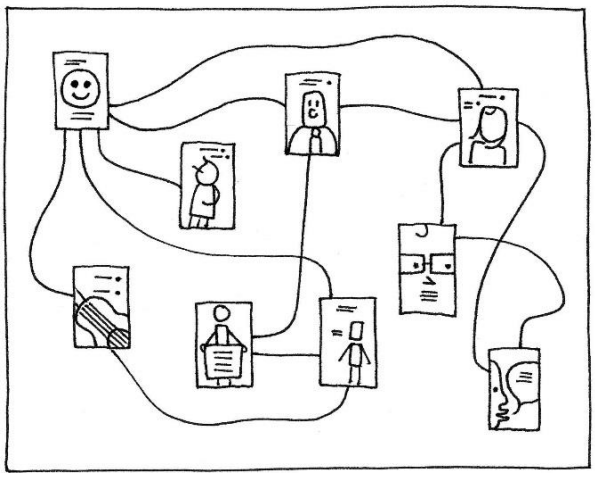


Figure 1 – Lo Tech Social Network Diagram

5. Exit Ticket:
    - Provide each student with a sticky note and have them answer the following questions before being dismissed:
        - One thing you want me to know about you is _____
        - Name a classmate and the connection with whom you had a surprising link

Lesson 2: Edmodo™ / Twitter™

Preparation

- Create class on Edmodo™
- Create personal profile on Edmodo™
- Create class account on Twitter™
- Create teacher profile on Twitter™

Materials

- Computers with Internet access
- Class list to record student aliases

Instruction

1. Social Networks
    - Review the class-created definition
    - On the board, brainstorm social networking apps that students frequently use
        - Once a list has been created, as a class, categorize and group all apps
        - Take a photo and post the categorized list on Edmodo™

2. Edmodo™
    - Introduce the platform Edmodo™
        - Interface similar to Facebook™
        - Demonstrate how to create a profile
            - Provide teacher profile as an example
            - Students will need to create their own profiles with an avatar

- NO PERSONAL PHOTOS
    - The Board of Education is a public body subject to the BC FOIPPA and the School Act. Both statutes contain provisions that regulate the public's access to information held by the District and govern the District's responsibilities to protect personal information from unauthorized access, use or disclosure. Under the FOIPPA, "personal information" means any information about an identifiable individual. Personal information may include data such as unique identifiers (PEN/SIN), school records, contact numbers, gender, medical history, education, employment, psychiatric history, behavioural assessments, personnel evaluations, digital images, audio and video recordings, racial or ethnic origin, sexual orientation or religious beliefs.
- Students have the opportunity to create an alias; have each student determine their own aliases and relay them to the teacher to be recorded
- On profiles, students must also answer the question: "The app that I could not live without is _____ ". In paragraph form, students must also explain how and why they use that application.

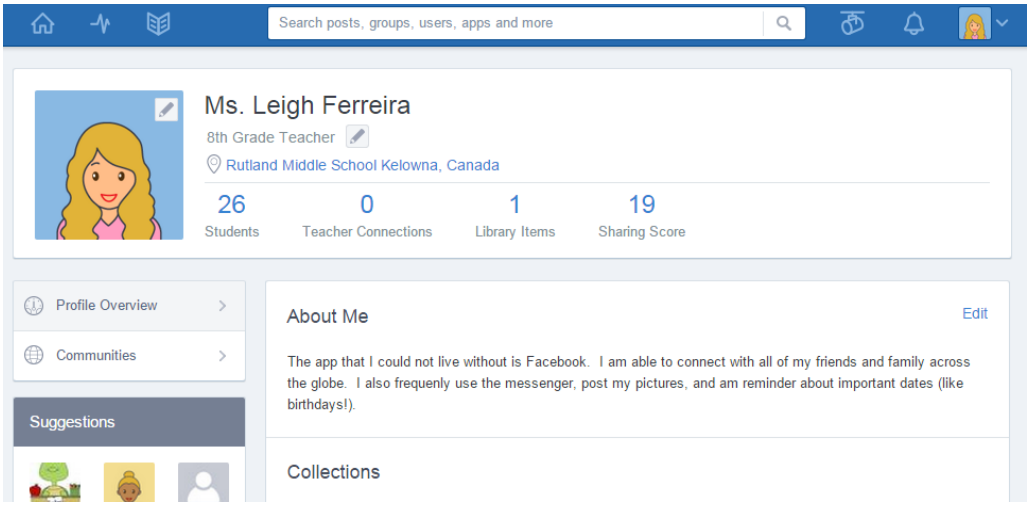


Figure 2 – Edmodo Sample Profile

3. Twitter™
    - Introduce the platform Twitter™
        - Demonstrate how to create a profile
            - Provide teacher profile as an example
            - Students will need to create their own profiles with an avatar; they may use the same profiles from Edmodo™
            - Again, NO PERSONAL PHOTOS

- Students have the opportunity to create an alias; have each student determine their own aliases and relay them to the teacher to be recorded; if so, it should be the same as their Edmodo™ account
- Review hash tag use
- Start a discussion asking whether social media is a hero or villain and have each student reply.

Lesson 3 and 4: Personal Social Networks

Preparation / Materials

- Upload "My Personal Network" Assignment onto Edmodo™ course page
- "My Personal Network" Example
- Computers with Internet access

Instruction

1. Personal Networks
   - Digital media plays a very important role in our lives today. As a class, discuss how students use email, text, Instagram™, SnapChat™, iTunes™, etc. as a part of their routine. Revisit the social networks categories determined the previous class.
   - Discuss how often students use these applications, how they use these different programs/applications in daily life, how effective these tools are in what they use them for, are these digital tools being used for their actual purpose, etc.

2. It was used for what?!?
   - As a class, determine the 10 most used social networking apps/programs in the class
   - Organize students into 10 evenly distributed groups and assign them one of the apps/programs.
   - As a group, they must research and present the original use and/or describe why the app or program was created.
     EXAMPLE: YouTube was originally created to post videos of dinner parties that were too large to send via email.

3. "My Personal Network"
   - Introduce "My Personal Network" Assignment
     - Students will be creating their murals using Glogster™ or "Poster my Wall". The student is to be situated in the middle of their poster and each of the programs and apps are around him/her (use drawings or digital images to symbolize the apps). A minimum of 5 apps/programs should be chosen.
     - On the mural, students will also need to explain **how** and **why** they use the different programs/apps. Students should start by describing the app/program. Then, students should consider how and why they use it, in addition to the advantages of using the program or app (i.e., is it better than another program that has the same use?) and the disadvantages or problems associated with its usage.
   - Mini-lesson on how to use "Poster My Wall" and Glogster™

- Mini-lesson on how to use the snipping tool
- When completed, post the Glogster™ link on Edmodo™ OR take a snip of "Poster My Wall" and post it on Edmodo™.

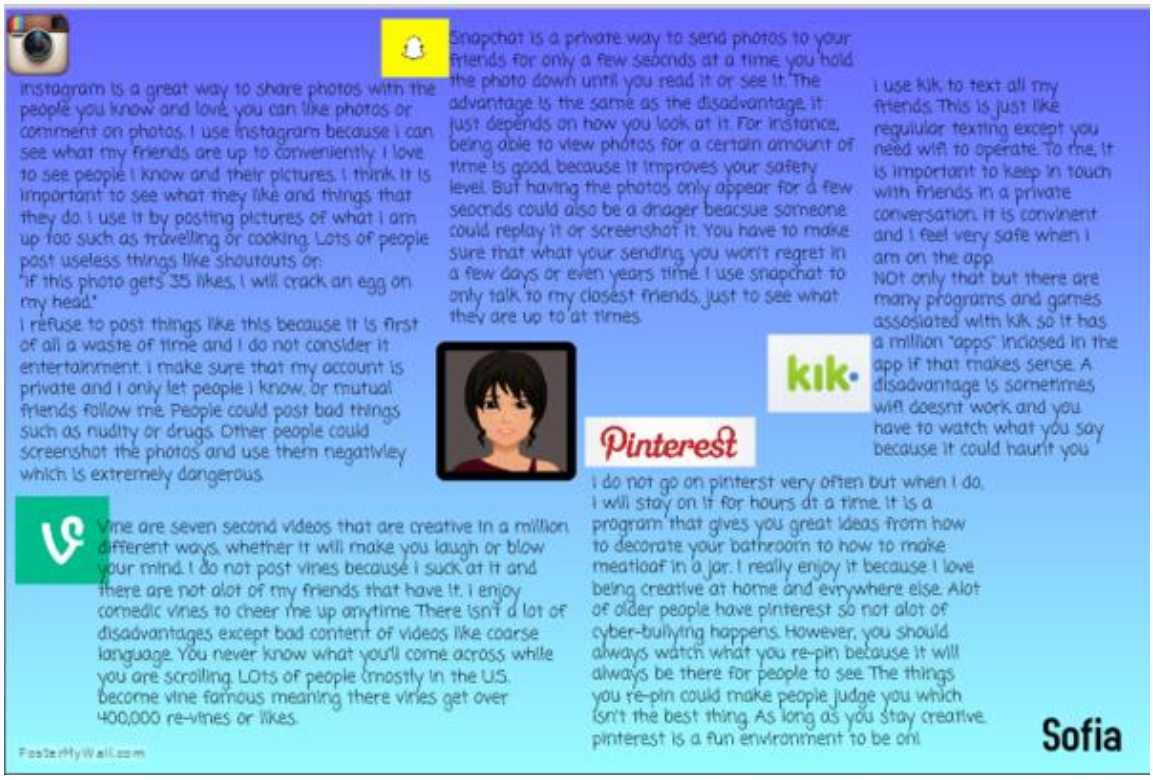


Figure 3 – "My Personal Networks" Sample

Lesson 5 and 6: What's App? Intro PBL and App Review

Preparation / Materials

- Upload "What's App?!?" App Review assignment onto Edmodo™ course page
- Computers with Internet access

Instruction

1. Introduction of PBL
    - Focus question: **In today's society, how would you make a relevant and successful app?**
        - In groups of 2 or 3, students will create a design and pitch a group-created application
        - Ideas will be shared with the class, as well as a panel of judges
            - Feedback will be used to revise before being placed on the website
        - Ideas will also be placed on the school website to be voted on

2. App Review
    - Have each student choose 5 apps in the each of the following categories:

- Social Media
- Game
- Information
- News
- Your choice

- Create a list, ensuring that no more than 2 students are researching each app
- For each app, students must complete the following questions:
    1. Explanation: What does the app do? What is it used for?
        - Students may use and manipulate explanations from previous assignments
    2. Statistics: How many people use this app?
    3. Audience: Who is this app targeting? Consider age, gender, etc. Which market is this app targeting?
    4. Category: Under which category(ies) in the App Store is this app classified?
    5. Rating: How many stars is this app given on the App Store?
        How many stars would you it in terms of:
        - Usability
        - Fun
        - 2 other criteria of your choice
    6. Popularity: In your opinion, what makes this app so popular? What would make it more popular?

Lesson 7 and 8: What's App?!? Brainstorm

Preparation / Materials

- Upload "What's App?!?" Design Your App assignment onto Edmodo™ course page
- Computers with Internet access

Instruction

1. Examine App Review findings
    - As a class, brainstorm and discuss app review findings to determine the criteria for app popularity and success
    - Have students compare and contrast apps in the same category and determine why one is more popular than the other
    - As a class, create a list of criteria for determining an app's popularity
    - Post on Edmodo™ for reference

2. "What's App?!?" Design Your App
    - Review assignment criteria
    - Co-create Criteria Rubric
        - A basic sample rubric has been provided (see supplementary materials)
    - In groups, have students brainstorm ideas for their app
        - Also, begin thinking about the app interface

Lesson 9: Branding / Marketing

Preparation / Materials

- Upload "What's App?!?" Design Your App Co-constructed Criteria onto Edmodo™
- "Name that Brand" PollRunner App (or Powerpoint)
- Post the PollRunner link on Edmodo™
- Evolution of Logos Overhead
- Slogan Quiz print outs (1 for each pair)
- Computers with Internet access
- iPhone or iPad
- Overhead Projector or Smartboard
- YouTube Videos downloaded
    - What is Branding? https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JKIAOZZritk
    - Advertising Techniques https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NdLsQcYyAcc

Instruction

1. Statistic on board: Teens see approximately 3,000 of these a day.
    - Discussion: Have students guess what this statistic could be referencing.
        - After guessing, and coming up with the answer, ask students if they think this number is possible.
        - Where could 3000 ads be seen per day?
        - Have students look around the room and count the amount of ads they see; think about ads on campus/school

2. Logo Quiz
    - Complete the "Name that Brand" Quiz on PollRunner
        - PollRunner is mobile app that lets users create, serve and monitor live polls from an iPhone or iPad
        - After creating poll questions, they can be served instantly with a single tap.
        - Students will need to log in to Edmodo™ in order to complete the votes on any web browser.
        - Results will be monitored and presented in real-time as students submit their votes
    - Evolution of Logo Overhead
        - Discuss how names of products are dropped over time due to the recognition by the average consumer, logos transcend cultures, etc.

3. Slogan Game
    - In partners, complete the slogan quiz
    - Discuss how many students actually knew the slogans without even realizing it
        - What does this finding tell us about branding and advertising, as well as their importance and influence?

4. Watch the following videos:
        - What is Branding? https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JKIAOZZritk
        - Advertising Techniques https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NdLsQcYyAcc

- As a class, discuss implications of the videos

5. Revisit and revise "What's App" PBL Criteria

Lesson 10: What's App Name / Logo and Slogan

Preparation/Materials

- Upload "What's App?!?" Design Your App revised co-constructed criteria onto Edmodo
- SurveyMonkey Mini-Lesson
- SurveyMonkey Instructions (class set)
- Computers with Internet access

Instruction

1. "What's App?" Design Your App
   - Have students work in partners to continue working on "What's App" app creation
   - Using the information gathered from the branding and advertising discussions and videos, have students apply what they have learned to brainstorm 3 possible names, 3 possible slogans, and 3 possible logos for their "What's App" app creation

2. Survey Monkey Mini-lesson
   - Review basic functioning of SurveyMonkey with the class
   - Using SurveyMonkey, have groups create three surveys:
     i. Three possible names for their app, three possible logos for their app
     ii. Three possible logos for their app
     iii. Three possible slogans
   - Each student must complete the surveys of all other groups
   - Students should use this feedback in their app creation

Lessons 11-14: What's App? Pitch

Preparation/Materials

- SurveyMonkey Mini-Lesson
- SurveyMonkey Instructions (class set)
- Computers with Internet access

Instruction

3. "What's App" App creation work time

4. "What's App" Proposal PowerPoint
   - Student proposals must include the following:
     - The name of the app
     - An image (logo) and slogan for the app
     - An explanation of why you chose to design this app
     - An explanation of what the app does
     - Your research: Does this app or an app like this already exist?

- Marketing: How does your App generate revenue? Will it cost money to purchase? Will there be ads?
- Safety / Privacy features
- Real World Application: What are the most prominent and potential problems of social media and how will your app address these issues?

3. "What's App" Synopsis
   - Have students create the following: a BRIEF (one to two sentence) description of their app with the logo and slogan.
   - Create a survey on SurveyMonkey with each groups' app descriptions, logo and slogan.

Lesson 15: Critical Friends Protocol

Preparation/Materials

- Review Critical Friends Protocol
- Computers with Internet access
- Projector

Instruction

1. Critical Friends
   - The benefit of the "Critical Friends Protocol" is to get feedback of your ideas or project in a risk-free environment.
   - The teacher acts as a task master and hold people to the time so that it does not take too long and everyone gets an opportunity to be involved.
   - Pair up groups.
   - Follow "Critical Friends Protocol" (see supplementary materials)

Lesson 16 and 17: Proposals and Revisions

Preparation/Materials

- Stream Dragon's Den video http://www.cbc.ca/dragonsden/pitches/liquid-hot-chocolate
- Computers with Internet access
- Projector

Instruction

1. Dragon's Den
   - Watch the following video: http://www.cbc.ca/dragonsden/pitches/liquid-hot-chocolate
   - As a class, determine why this video was a successful proposal and what made these entrepreneurs successful. Students should apply these criteria to their proposals.

2. What's App Revisions

- Based on the feedback from the "Critical Friends Protocol," as well as the criteria gathered from the Dragon's Den video, groups should revise their apps and pitches accordingly.

Lesson 18: "What's App?!?" Authentic Proposals

Preparation/Materials

- What's App?!? Rubrics (one for each judge)
- Computers with Internet access
- Projector

Instruction

1. What's App Proposal
    - Each group will present and present their Apps to the class, and a panel of "judges"
        - Try to ask a variety of people: the Tech teacher, an Administrator, an Advertising Executive, etc.
    - Using the rubric, have each judge assess each presentation
    - During the presentation, students should reflect on their peer's proposals
        - List two aspects the group did well or you liked about the group's presentation and one aspect that the presenting group can improve upon
    - Once everyone has completed their presentations, have the class vote on the best proposal
        - Students may not vote for their own app

Lesson 19: Final Revisions

Preparation/Materials

- What's App?!? Marked Rubrics
- Computers with Internet access
- Projector

Instruction

1. What's App Revisions
    - Using the feedback from the class and the judges, have students complete any last minute revisions
    - Place the revised Survey Monkey on the School Website

Lesson 20: Reflection

Preparation/Materials

- Upload What's App?!? Self-Assessment and Reflection on Edmodo™
- Computers with Internet access
- Projector

Instruction

1. Reflection

- Review the results from the class and school surveys
- Have each student complete a reflection and self-assessment
    - Review the criteria for what makes a successful app. Was your app successful? Did it fail? Why or why not? What could you have changed to make it more successful? What was your favourite part of this assignment? What were the benefits to working in your group? What were the challenges?
    - When completed, post on Edmodo™

Supplementary Materials

See the pages below for printouts/handouts for each lesson and assignment.

COURSE OVERVIEW

E-Write 8

Miss Ferreira

During this course, students will learn valuable 21st century skills through Project and Inquiry-based learning situations. Students will gain a stronger sense of self, as well as a sense of both local and global community. *Ewrite 8* will focus on digital citizenship and media literacy, focusing specifically on social media. Media Literacy is a way of thinking about the media; a way of deconstructing media messages to gain more control over them. In this class, we'll be deconstructing media content - apps, photographs, newspaper articles, advertisements, TV shows, movies, documentaries, public relations materials, websites, and more specifically, social networks - and develop an understanding of how this media content influences us and how we in turn can influence others.

Students will be watching Pod Casts, YouTube clips, reading editorials and stories, and reviewing how to think and write critically. This course is designed to be an active, practical, and computer based curriculum which will further develop both students' critical thinking and writing skills. Students will also be working as an online community, working, collaborating and commenting on each other's ideas and opinions through online class discussion forums using Edmodo.

Expectations:

- The majority of work will be completed on laptops and will be monitored closely to ensure appropriate internet skills are being used.
- All online material has been placed on the course webpage (Edmodo) to discourage students from online wandering.
- Due to the online focus, students are required to have an active email address.
- It is expected that all students respond to other's blogs in a positive and constructive manner. There will be NO TOLERANCE for inappropriate blogs and comments. Laptop privileges will be taken away immediately and work will be completed on paper.

These learning outcomes addressed in this course include:

- Making meaningful personal connections with ideas presented in a variety of texts to increase understanding, self and others
- Engaging actively as readers and listeners to construct meaning, deepen thinking and comprehension, and promote inquiry
- Critically engaging with text
- Analyzing the ways that language can be manipulated for specific purposes
- Analyzing the accuracy, reliability, and relevance of information
- Presenting ideas and information and adjust point of view, voice, and tone for a variety of purposes
- Developing and defending a position with supporting evidence
- Assessing and adjusting communication to improve its clarity, effectiveness and impact
- Viewing, both collaboratively and independently, to comprehend a variety of visual texts, such as broadcast media, web sites, film and video, visual components of media
- Interpreting and analyzing ideas and information from **texts,** by making and supporting judgments and examining and comparing ideas and elements within and among **texts**
- Selecting and using a range of strategies to generate, develop, and organize ideas for writing and representing, including making connections, setting a purpose and considering audience, gathering and summarizing ideas from personal interest, knowledge, and inquiry, and setting class-generated criteria

By the end of this course, you will be able to answer the following questions:

1. **What is a digital citizen? What is digital media?**
2. **How can I be a responsible and positive digital citizen?**
3. **How am I digitally connected to my world?**
4. **How can I use the SD23 attributes of being a learner, an innovator, and thinker (digitally)?**
5. **What role do I play in my community (digitally and in reality)?**

Our goals for the year:

- Become competent digital citizens and develop 21st century skills
- Appreciate digital media
- Understand the connectedness of our world, both digitally and in the community
- Think critically about our roles in social networks

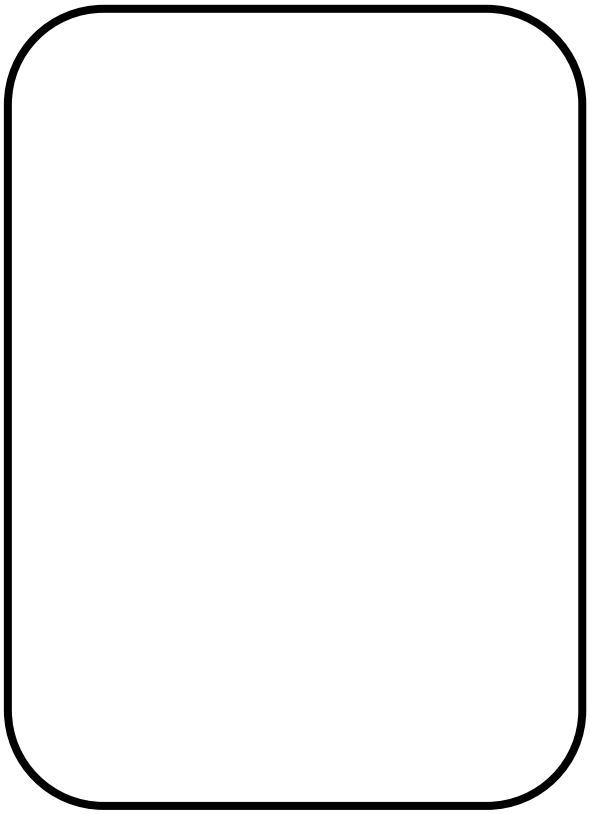
Missed Assignments:

It is the student's responsibility to find out what work was missed due to an absence. Because the majority of the course is online on the Edmodo website, students can easily catch-up and verify what was missed.

Evaluation based on learning outcomes through:

Assignments / Projects
Personal Growth / Writing Improvement
Personal Blog Writing
Community Blogging and Commenting (participating in the class' online community)

LO TECH SOCIAL NETWORK



NAME _____

BIRTHDAY _____

LIKES _____

_____

_____

FAVOURITE SUBJECT _____

MOST USED APPS

_____

_____

_____

_____

MY FAVOURITE ONLINE APP OR SOCIAL NETWORKING SITE IS _____

BECAUSE _____

_____

IN TERMS OF TECHNOLOGY, I COULD NOT LIVE WITHOUT MY _____

BECAUSE _____

_____

MY FAVOURITE ONLINE GAME IS _____

I SPEND _____ HOURS ON MY PHONE EVERY DAY.

I SPEND _____ HOURS WATCHING TV/MOVIES EVERY DAY.

I SPEND _____ HOURS ON A COMPUTER EVERY DAY.

MY GOAL(S) / HOPE(S) FOR THIS CLASS IS/ARE _____

_____

_____

Getting to know you....

Name: _____ Course:_____ Block: _____

Home Phone #: _____

Parent(s) or Guardian(s) Name(s):_____

Phone #:_____ Email:_____

Name:_____

Phone #:_____ Email:_____

I live with (circle): both parents mom dad other (please specify)_____

Are you involved with extracurricular activities? If so, what are they?

_____

_____

_____

How many hours a week do you spend on extracurricular activities?_____

Do you work? Yes No If so, where? _____

How many hours do you spend a week working?_____

I like, or my strengths in school are: _____

_____

_____

I don't like, or my weaknesses in school are: _____

_____

_____

One interesting thing about you:_____

_____

_____

I have read the attached course outline.

Student signature:

_____

Parent/guardian signature:

_____

This sheet is to be returned to Miss Ferreira

My Personal Network

Essential questions:

How do we use digital media in our daily lives?

What does our personal digital network look like?

Goal:

Digital Media plays a very important role in our lives today.

Think about how you use email, text, Instagram, Snapchat, iTunes, etc. as a part of your routine. How often do you use these applications? How do you use these different programs/applications in your daily life? How effective are these tools in what you use them for? Are these digital tools being used for their actual purpose? Etc.

Task:

You will be creating your mural using "Glogster" or "Poster my Wall". The idea is that you are in the middle of your poster and each of the programs and apps are around you (use drawings or print images to symbolize them).

On the mural, you will also need to explain **how and why** you use the different programs/apps. Start by describing what the app/program actually is. Then consider how and why you use it, in addition to the advantages of using the program or app (ie/ is it better than another program that has the same use?) and the disadvantages or problems associated with its usage.

Name_____

Rubric:

Competency	Approaching Expectations 2	Meeting Expectations 3	Exceeding Expectations 4
Self-Awareness	Student has demonstrated a satisfactory understanding of their own digital network. Students are aware of the use of applications, but are not clearly able to articulate how and why, and may not mention the global advantages and disadvantages of their usage.	Student has shown a good understanding of their own digital network. Students are aware of the use of applications, and are able to articulate how and why, and mention the global advantages and disadvantages of their usage.	Student has demonstrated an excellent understanding of their own digital network. Students are aware of the use of applications, and are able to clearly and thoroughly articulate how and why, as well as show a deeper understanding of the global advantages and disadvantages of their usage.
Communication	Some helpful pictures/ graphics to support explanations Some explanations of the network (brief sentences)	Interesting and useful pictures/ graphics to support explanations Good explanations of the network (several detailed sentences)	Clear and concise, well-chosen pictures/ graphics to support explanations Clear and detailed explanations of the network (paragraph explanations)

TOTAL /12

What's App?!?

APP REVIEW

Choose 5 apps in the each of the following categories:

- Social Media
- Game
- Information
- News
- Your choice

For each app, students must complete the following questions:

1. Explanation: What does the app do? What is it used for?
2. Statistics: How many people use this app?
3. Audience: Who is this app targeting? Consider age, gender, etc. Which market is this app targeting?
4. Category: Under which category(ies) in the App Store is this app categorized?
5. Rating: How many stars is this app given on the App Store?
   How many stars would you it in terms of:
   - Usability
   - Fun
   - 2 other criteria of your choice
6. Popularity: In your opinion, what makes this app so popular? What would make it more popular?

COMPETENCY	2	3	4
COMMUNICATION - **Explanation** - **Statistics** - **Audience** - **Category** - **Rating**	Some explanations of the application and some of the categories. A comprehensible presentation of your idea. Criteria are missing.	Good explanations of the application and the categories. A clear and interesting presentation of your idea. Most criteria are met.	Clear and detailed explanations of the application and the categories. An outstanding, clear and interesting presentation of your idea. All criteria are met.
REAL WORLD CONNECTIONS - **Popularity**	Popularity of apps is not or is only minimally explained.	Popularity of apps is explained.	Popularity of apps is thoroughly explained.

What's App?!?

DESIGN YOUR APP

In a group of two or three, you are to design your own app.

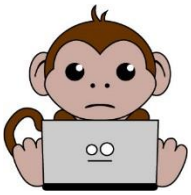
Don't worry you don't have to actually create it, you have to just try and come up with your own original idea for a cool new app! Each group will create a pitch for their app. The pitch should include the following features:

- The name of the app
- An image (logo) and slogan for the app
- An explanation of why you chose to design this app
- An explanation of what the app does
- Your research: Does this app or an app like this already exist?
- Marketing: How does your App generate revenue? Will it cost money to purchase? Will there be ads?
- Safety / Privacy features
- Real World Application: What are the most prominent and potential problems of social media and how will your app address these issues?

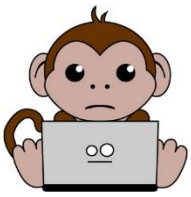
Once completed, your proposal will be presented to a panel of community judges.
Your designs will also be posted on the school website for judging.

Group members: _____

COMPETENCY	2	3	4
COMMUNICATION - **Explanation** - **Target Audience** - **Category** - **Safety** - **Revenue**	Some explanations of the application and some of its features. A comprehensible presentation of your idea. Criteria are missing.	Good explanations of the application and its features. A clear and interesting presentation of your idea. Most criteria are met.	Clear and detailed explanations of the application and its features. An outstanding, clear and interesting presentation of your idea. All criteria are met.
DESIGN - **Interface** - **Logo** - **Slogan**	An acceptable design, although more thought is needed.	An interesting, realistic and well-designed application.	A creative, realistic and original application.
REAL WORLD APPLICATIONS	Potential problems of social media are not or minimally explained.	Potential problems of social media are explained.	Potential problems of social media are thoroughly explained.



SurveyMonkey



The idea of using this program is to find out what your fellow classmates think of your ideas before you finalize your decisions on names, colours, price for your app, etc.

In order to use this program, you will need to create an account.

Only one of your group members needs to create the account, but make sure you write down your username and password.

Once you are into the program, click on the **+Create survey** green button. Choose your own colours, etc. Then you need to click the **+ add question** button. You need to write your question and then select the multiple choice option.

YOU MUST PROVIDE THREE SUGGESTIONS EACH OF APP NAMES, LOGOS AND SLOGAN SUGGESTIONS.

You may also choose to ask other questions to aid in your app creation;

Some examples might be:

Would you be interested in using an app that _____.

How much would you pay for this app?

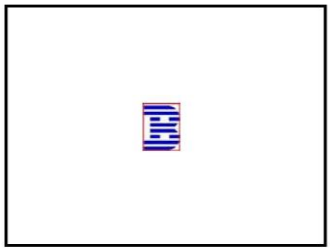
Which name do you prefer?

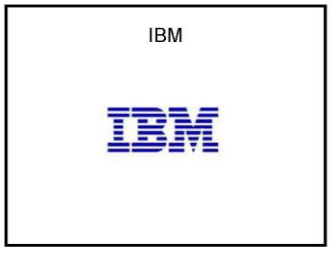
Which logo/colour do you prefer?

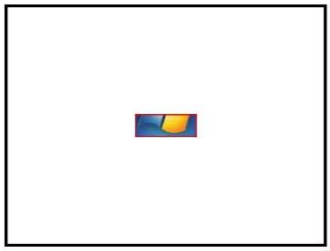
Once you have completed the survey, you can click **Send Survey** at the bottom. You can then copy the link and paste it into our group on EDMODO. The other students can then answer the questions from there.

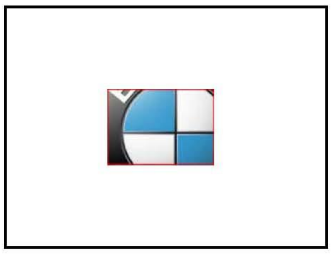
*Once the others in the class have completed your survey, you can log back into www.surveymonkey.com and view your results. You can then use the data to help create your app. You can also print out the results.

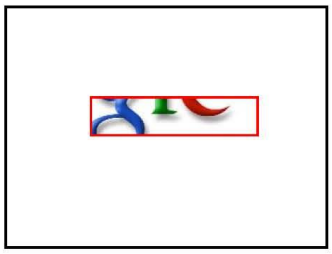
NAME THAT LOGO



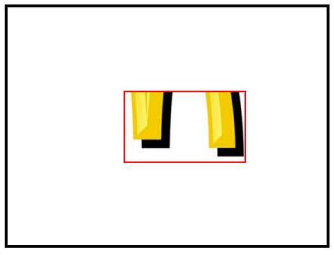


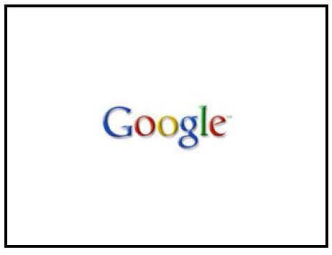


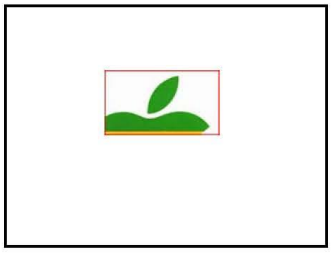




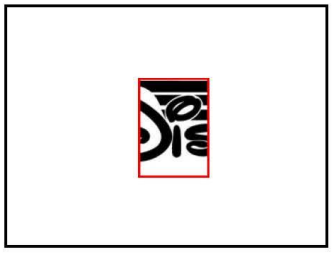

BMW

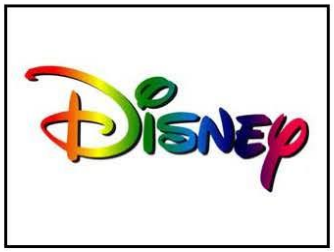



Google




i'm lovin' it

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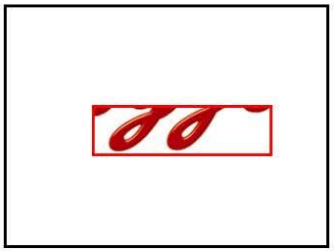
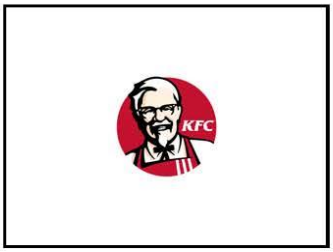
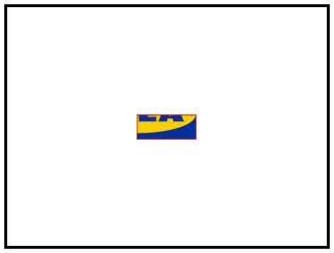
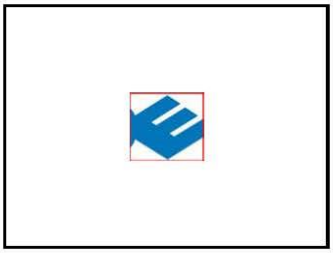


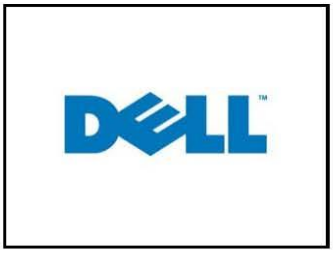

KFC

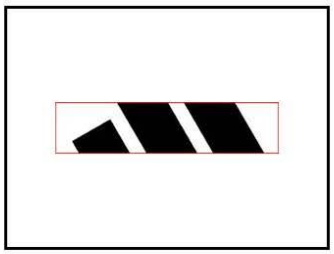


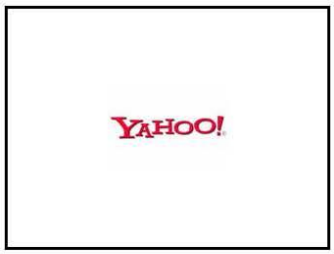

Kellogg's



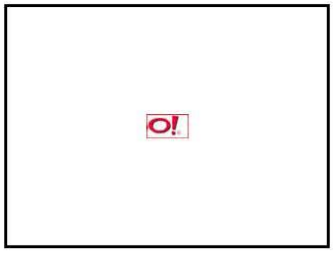

IKEA


DELL

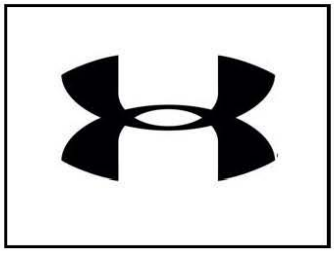


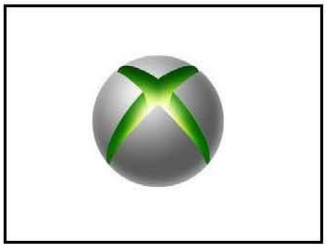

YAHOO!

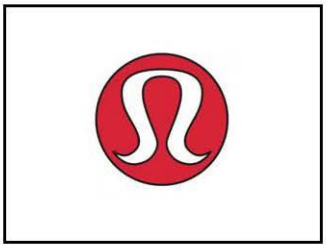

adidas

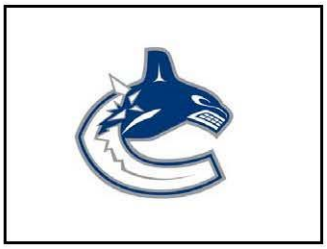


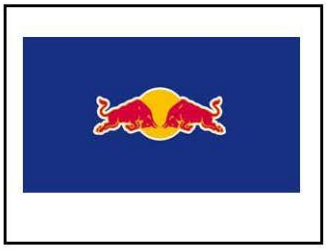

BURGER
KING











EVOLUTION OF LOGOS

SLOGAN GAME

1) Maybe she's born with it _____

2) The copper-topped battery _____

3) The nighttime, sniffing, sneezing, coughing, aching, stuffy head, fever, so you can rest medicine _____

4) It just keeps going, and going, and going _____

5) The quicker picker upper! _____

6) The best part of waking up is _____ in your cup.

7) They're Grrrrrreat! _____

8) Eat fresh! _____

9) Melts in your mouth, not in your hands _____

10) Impossible is nothing. _____

11) Just Do It _____

12) Have it your way _____

13) Save money. Live better. Always low prices, always _____

14) Live in your world. Play in ours. _____

15) Challenge everything. _____

16) The happiest place on earth. _____

17) Snap, Crackle, Pop! _____

18) Be connected. Be Discovered. _____

19) Mmm Mmm Good! _____

20) I'm lovin' it! _____

SLOGAN GAME

ANSWER SHEET

1) Maybelline
2) Duracell
3) Nyquil
4) Energizer
5) Bounty
6) Folgers
7) Frosted Flakes
8) Subway
9) M & M's
10) Adidas
11) Nike
12) Burger King
13) Walmart
14) Sony Playstation
15) EA Games
16) Disney World
17) Kellogg's Rice Crispies
18) Facebook
19) Campbell's Soup
20) McDonald's

Critical Friends Protocol
(Teacher Instructions)

The benefit of the critical friends protocol is to get feedback of ideas or project in a risk-free environment.

Presentation • Students of Group #1 sit facing Group #2 • Group #1 presents their ideas and main points of their project • Group #2 does not talk	**2 min**
Clarification • Group #2 asks clarifying questions • Group #1 responds to questions	**1 min**
"I like…" • Group #1 turns around (it makes them listen and allows the other group to be more honest) • Group #2 shares group #1 what they like about their project	**1.5 min**
"I wonder…" • Group #1 stays turned around • Group #2 shares their concerns about the project…what might not work or possible issues. • Make sure they use the language "I wonder…" which is non-threatening • Have Group #1 write down "I wonder…"s or answers for their response time	**1.5 min**
Reflection • Group #1 turns back around to face Group #2 • Group #1 has a chance to respond to the Group #2's "likes and wonders"	**1.5 min**
"I have…" • Group #2 tells Group #1 if they have any information, contacts, etc. that they can use	**1 min**

Once completed, switch roles of Group #1 for Group #2 and repeat.

What's App?!?

SELF-ASSESSMENT

&

REFLECTION

Group Work Self-Assessment Rubric

Name _____

1 - Seldom 2 - Sometimes 3 - Usually 4 - Always

CRITERIA	1	2	3	4
Co-operation I worked cooperatively with other members of my group and was willing to help with any task.				
Respect I listened to others' ideas, considered their points of view and offered constructive suggestions.				
Effort I contributed as much as I could to group discussions and to the work required.				
Responsibility I worked responsibly and to the best of my ability on my contributions to the task.				
Task Commitment I focused on what we needed to do throughout the process of our task and kept working even when I found something challenging.				
Problem Solving I tried to think of and use good problem solving strategies throughout the process of completing the task.				

What's App?!?

SELF-ASSESSMENT

&

REFLECTION

Reflect on the following questions.
Type your responses in a word document and submit your reflection on Edmodo.

1. Review the criteria for what makes a successful app.
   Was your app successful? Did it fail? Why or why not?

2. What could you have changed to make it more successful?

3. What was your favourite part of this assignment?

4. What were the benefits to working in a/your group?

5. Did you experience any challenges in working in a/your group? What were they? If you faced group challenges, how did you solve them?

6. What was the most challenging aspect of this project?

7. One thing you learned:

8. One question you still have:

9. How could this project, and specifically the way you designed your app, have been more successful in improving your learning process?

Chapter 4

Reflections

Classroom Struggles and Challenges – A Tale of Engagement

From the moment students enter my classroom, a place which should be a sanctuary of literature, livres and laughs, I begin the struggle to engage the "I hate reading" and "French is stupid" thoughts that plague my students. As a teacher of English and French, I constantly strive to engage my students and my goal has always been to convert the negative judgments and inspire a love of textual engagement in all its forms.

Throughout my teaching career I have noticed is that while I was doing all that I could at the front of the classroom to engage students with subject matter, which included dressing up, telling jokes, and performing many other acts that one might see at a carnival, students were more concerned with the messages, updates and apps on their cell phones. Asking a student to put away their 'iDevice' provoked a reaction that may be equated to telling him or her that I was going to cut off their hand, and - perish the thought - it would be their texting hand. Rather than fight the inevitable, I decided I needed to pedagogically embrace this adolescent Holy Grail; however, instead of blindly integrating students' social networks into my classroom simply for the sake of incorporating technology, I wanted to teach students to think about how and why these forums are used and can be used.

Upon entering the Masters of Education program in 21st century literacies, I knew that I wanted my project to be devoted to integrating and analyzing the online social networks that my students frequently use with the intention of increasing their engagement and critical thinking skills.

In this chapter applying what I learned from my literature review, I discuss the process of creating the *Ewrite* course, and specifically using Edmodo™ as the platform for design, the course assessment rationale, and the challenges that I faced during the teaching of the course. Finally, I discuss the recommendations for future research based on my literature review and experience, and conclude with my final thoughts and future plans.

Designing the *Ewrite* course

When I transferred from working in a high school to a middle school, I was offered the opportunity to create a computer-based course whose purpose was to promote students' writing and critical thinking skills. I began by creating the 10-week *Ewrite 7* course. Having no curriculum on which to base the course, I created mini-lessons on the topics of digital footprints, cyber-bullying, gender in sport, body image in the media, and so on. Student feedback was overwhelmingly positive, and a group of students approached the administration to solicit an *Ewrite 8* course. Students continued to approach me in the hallways with ideas for new course projects and discussions. Although their immediate promotion of a continuation of the *Ewrite* course flattered me, I was more pleased with the fact that students were taking learning into their own hands. Moreover, I experienced feelings of great success in the fact that students felt confident and safe enough to share their ideas with me knowing that they would be heard. I devote myself to maintaining a constant "dialogue" resulting in what I believe to be "true education" (Freire, 1966, p. 158) in my classroom. Students knew that the course would be co-constructed in order to meet their individual interests and learning needs. Ultimately, with student suggestions, I determined that the focus of the course would be on social networks, media and applications where students would connect "writing practices with real-world experiences and tasks" (NCTE, 2008, p. 4). Furthermore, by considering and implementing

student voice into the course topics of social networks and applications into the course, I was "engaging in conversation with […] students [to] exercise greater control over what [I] teach" and engaging in "ongoing curricular experimentation according to student concerns" (Pinar, 2004, p. 196).

The first readings that inspired and supported my decision to incorporate social networks and applications into the classroom was Prensky's (2011) *From Digital Natives to Digital Wisdom* and Hicks's (2009) *Digital Writing Workshop*. Prensky asserts that education and educators in the 21st century need to adapt and to change by listening to students in order to create important, useful learning and life opportunities which involve technology *as a support.* Similarly, Hicks (2009) asserts that teachers must "teach digital writing in both face-to-face as well as virtual spaces" (p. 132). Furthermore, it is integral that "technology and writing [...] be seen as intricately intertwined" (Hicks, 2009, p. 134). Teachers must integrate technology not for the sake of simply using electronics, but because it enhances students' writing processes. It is important and necessary that teachers "understan[d] the affordances and constraints of different digital writing tools, as well as why [we] are employing those tools" (Hicks, 2009, p. 134). In addition, the results of the research by several scholars (Annetta et al., 2008; Groenke & Maples, 2008; Junco et al., 2010; Leu et al., 2014; Wendt & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2014) supported that traditional literacy skills still need to be taught as a base in conjunction with new literacy based skills. Taking this balance into consideration, I sifted through the learning outcomes from the 2013 British Columbia Education's Digital Literacy Competencies, in addition to the British Columbia Ministry of Education's draft (2013) and current (2007) English Language Arts Curriculum and applied specific PLOs to the *Ewrite* learning outcomes. I believed that using Edmodo™ and Twitter ™ and analyzing other the social networks and applications would

combine students in and out-of-school literacies. In addition, by using a project-based learning pedagogy as described by the Buck Institute for Education (2015), I believed that I could achieve this balance between traditional literacy practices and those that incorporate differentiated learning, critical thinking practices, multimodal creations, collaboration, and overall, a relevant curriculum for students.

Despite the fact that I wanted to integrate these online sources as a forum to engage my students because these forums mimic their real world settings, I learned from the research of Groenke and Maples (2008), Junco et al. (2010), Leu et al. (2014), and Wendt and Rockinson-Szapkiw (2014) that students may perceive the integration into the classroom of social networks and apps, as well as online collaborative work, as more difficult than traditional pen and paper assignments. Therefore, I understood that it was necessary that I scaffolded, facilitated, and participated in the process myself. As such, I took the time to complete each activity that I was asking students to complete myself, and shared my trials and tribulations with them, and provided a sample of each assignment.

Prensky's and Hicks's perspectives also reaffirmed my belief that because the locus of knowledge for students has moved a great extent from the teacher to the Internet and because best pedagogical practices involve using students' personal passions as a tool to engage, today's teachers need to find ways to create and mold 21st century citizens who imitate less and think more. Thus, I determined that the *Ewrite* course would focus on digital citizenship and media literacy, focusing specifically on and deconstructing social media and networks to gain more control over them and to develop an understanding of how this media content influences us and how we in turn can influence others both positively and negatively using these forums. It was also important that I took part in this process, as I believe that exploration and learning needs to

be a reciprocal and collaborative process between teacher and student and students themselves. Because

> no individual, such as a teacher, can keep up with the many new literacies that rapidly and continuously appear online…each of us has to depend on others to help us acquire the continuously updated literacies of online reading comprehension. (Leu, 2007, p. 7)

Ultimately, I learned that the issue in education is not just how much of current education is taught, but what we are teaching. I believe that much of the curriculum is outdated and does not seem relevant to many students, making it difficult to engage them. These fundamental ideas guided and affected the goals of my *Ewrite* course and unit: students will become competent digital citizens and develop 21st century skills; appreciate digital media; understand the connectedness of our world, both digitally and in the community; and think critically about our roles in social networks.

In the *Ewrite* course, students have opportunities to critically evaluate online sources. As the research suggests, it is not the information that is hard to track, it is the ability to apply critical evaluating, inferential reasoning, self-regulation skills and affective variables related to efficacy and motivation (Coiro, 2007; Groenke & Maples, 2008). However, I knew I needed to take time to accurately and thoroughly teach planning and outlining while providing enough prior knowledge in order to ensure student success and to avoid anxiety, confusion and frustration in the completion of the tasks (Tabatabai & Shore, 2005) and the use of the programs, and overall to use class time efficiently. Even though I assumed that my students are "digital natives […] they may not have the skills and abilities to create and critique all the kinds of digital media that they consume" (Hicks, 2009, p. 129) and that we would be analyzing in the course.

Another study that I found crucial to my project and understanding was the research by Junco et al. (2010) on integrating Twitter™ into the classroom. While the results were positive in that Twitter facilitated communication, engagement, and the leveling of roles and relationships between classmates, as well as the teacher and students, it was noted that not all students were eager to participate in this nontraditional new forum. Cole (2009) also highlighted this challenge, noting that in her research students were hesitant to try new activities when they were not able to draw an immediate connection with the curriculum. This finding is consistent within my own teaching experience. Therefore, it is necessary that when educators introduce a new literacy into the classroom, especially ones that are typically seen as non-traditional and non-educational such as social networks and applications, the educational links are made clear, not only for the students, but for the teaching staff and administration as well. When I read these studies, I learned that I had to make my *Ewrite* curriculum outcomes clear and transparent for all students in order to have them fully engaged and to attain the course's goals--as can be seen in my course overview. I opened the unit with a general overview of the course's foci, the mediums students would be working in and with, as well as the course expectations, learning outcomes, goals and evaluation sources. This course overview was reviewed in class, and was sent home with students to be reviewed by parents, signed and returned.

Using Edmodo™ as a learning platform.

Due to its usage amongst several educators in the district, I chose Moodle™ as the platform when I created the *Ewrite 7* course. The integration of an online socially interactive forum was necessary as one of the most significant benefits to using Moodle™ in the *Ewrite 7* course was that students' "written performance [was] assisted [...] through the phenomenon of self-directed speech … linked to social interaction" (Thompson, 2013, p. 258) as in Phase 2 of Vygtosky's

Zone of Proximal Development. Each student acted as "critical partner" playing the "dual role of teacher and co-constructor" who prompted and questioned (Thompson, 2013, p. 260) each other's work and rationale. This forum provided a constructive setting for each student to provide mutual support and advice. Moreover, student writing and representing became "public, participatory, and continually develop[ed]" (McGrail & Davis, 2011, p. 415). Also, because students became each other's authentic audience, this social structure "support[ed] [their] cognitive growth" (McGrail & Davis, 2011, p. 433). I noticed that students unintentionally participated in "peer review sessions [that] creat[ed] an awareness of stylistic concerns and rhetorical choices" (Melkun, 2012, p. 34), and encouraged each other to be more conscientious and reflective in their writing choices and process. As a result, students were constantly reflecting on and revising their products, re-evaluating and reorganizing content. Ultimately, working in a collaborative online setting "forc[ed] [students] to grapple with content and style issues that would otherwise have gone unnoticed and unquestioned" (Melkun, 2012, p. 38). This feedback is invaluable in a classroom, especially when coming from an audience other than the teacher.

In addition, students' writing and metacognition skills significantly improved. For the students who typically struggle with writing, working as part of an online community "help[ed] them to appropriate higher writing standards, [and] develop self-regulation skills" (National Council of Teachers for English, 2008, p. 4) resulting in improved writing and thinking processes. Ultimately, by using the online learning forum, Edmodo™, "through working within a constructed ZPD, [students] developed the ability to negotiate meaning through collaboration" (Thompson, 2013, p. 264). In addition, although I had used Moodle™ as the learning platform for the *Ewrite 7* course as it successfully met my teaching management needs for a gradebook,

assignment accessibility and submission, and so on, student feedback was not generally positive, specifically in regards to its interface. Furthermore, despite its socially interactive blogging environment, the Moodle™ forum still seemed to be linear and rigid in terms of its course content distribution.

According to the Edmodo™ website, this online platform claims to give students new ways to engage, participate, and express themselves. With Edmodo™, teachers and students can post discussion topics, conduct polls, award badges and likes, and more, to foster communication and make learning social. In addition, Edmodo™ is designed to give the teacher complete control over his or her digital classroom. It integrates tools that enable the teacher to determine who can join groups, ensure they remain private, and monitor member activity, thus ensuring student safety. Lastly, Edmodo™ was appealing to me because its interface is similar to Facebook™'s interface. Students are also able to interact with multimodality, including pictures and videos in posts and comments rather than just text. Therefore, I believed that this forum would not only be appealing to students, but it would also be one with which students felt comfortable.

Assessment.

The assessment portion of the *Ewrite* course and unit was difficult, as students are being evaluated on both offline and online skills. I have provided simplified rubrics to aid in assessment that were created with my own students. I believe that in order to have students engaged in and believe that they have a role in the process, and because students "benefit from a combination of self-evaluation and peer evaluation to appropriate higher writing standards, to develop self-regulation skills" as well as "to develop understanding of voice in writing" (NCTE, 2008, p. 3), these rubrics should be, at least in part, co-created with the students. Moreover, because students took part in the assessment process and rubric creation, they "benefit[ed] from a

metacognitive understanding of revision; rather than just learning steps in a process, they [were] constantly reflect[ing] upon their own writing [and creating] performances" (NCTE, 2008, p. 3). Furthermore, as I believe in the power of student voice and the principles of PBL, I credit importance to formative assessment throughout the process, as well as self and peer assessment, in addition to the feedback from the authentic audience. In my experience, positive feedback and the engagement and motivation from a public forum both intrinsically and extrinsically encouraged students to progress. Students took part in inviting community members into the classroom and were constantly asking who had confirmed and when they could attend.

Challenges in the implementation of the *Ewrite* course.

Despite the best of intentions to actualize the students' use of "out of school literacies practices" (Bruce, 2009, p. 147) with social media and applications in the classroom, I experienced roadblocks during the implementation of my technology-based unit. Some issues I faced, and challenges that other educators should anticipate having to overcome, and as well as concerns that educators must keep in mind, are significant and potentially limiting. Access to technology is likely the single greatest potential barrier in implementing my proposed project, as well to other programs that successfully integrate online forums and applications. With teacher layoffs, school closures, the present political situation in the province, and the current economic climate there is a scarcity of resources in public education. In my district, and specifically in the area where I work, the school budget is limited and where five years ago, resources were being diverted to improve technology infrastructures, presently, there is a decline in access to technology funding. Implementation of my *Ewrite* curriculum proposal, and other educational programs integrating social networks, require all students to have access to their own laptops or computers. In my proposed course, computers are necessary for every class for a semester, and

as an isolated unit, for approximately four weeks of class time. In a school that shares laptop carts amongst classrooms, this access to hardware was a significant issue during the block that I was running the *Ewrite* course.

In addition, Crook (2008), Junco et al. (2010) and Sandretto and Tilson (2013) postulated in their own respective works, that the implementation of this course, or a course like this one, will require teachers and students to re-educate themselves on what it means to be a learner in today's digital age. The onus is on educators to seek professional development opportunities and take time to determine what will work in their classrooms for their students. In order to create this course, I spent several hours outside of the school day to work with different programs, for example Edmodo™ and Moodle™, to determine which would work best for my students and course. Also, I created a workshop during the fall professional development session to share and reflect on the creation of the *Ewrite* course, as well as to get feedback from other teachers in my district.

In addition, another challenge that I faced was that once students were engaged in the process, at times, it was difficult to have them focus on non-traditional supplementary coursework. Setting clear deadlines, guidelines, as well as scaffolding and participating with students, in combination with having an authentic audience to present to, helped to overcome these obstacles.

A final barrier in the implementation of my curriculum proposal was the online collaboration aspect. Despite having flexibility in an online situation, in my experience, some students viewed participation in group learning as an impediment to their progress and often denounced collaborative learning situations imposed by course design. They spoke about negative past experiences working with unproductive and/or difficult peers, having had to carry

more than their perceived fair share of the workload, and receiving a grade that they believe did not reflect their level of contribution to the group project. Despite all of the advantages of collaborative environments, which I have learned through experience and observation, I saw these hesitations in some of my students' reactions to the proposal of group processes and products. Nonetheless, given the vast variability of my students' backgrounds and their different learning strategies and because I regularly communicate with my students, I knew their learning and collaborative group tendencies. Thus, I strategically selected group members "taking into account not only cognitive aspects where a balance is commonly intended, but also, the participants' interpersonal skills" (Oliveira et al., 2011, p. 1357) in order to ensure a positive and effective collaborative working environment.

Ultimately, this *Ewrite* course and unit plan is a beginning or an attempt to integrate students' out-of-school literacy practices into the classroom in order to promote engagement and critical thinking skills. Indeed, teaching one unit using social networks and applications is not enough to maintain and transfer engagement and critical thinking skills into regular practice. Student engagement and critical thinking skills should be the basis of all education across all curriculum, and as the research suggests, can be introduced at a young age. Regardless, this unit can be used to start or continue these learning processes within the classroom and in my experience, this course resulted in students' learning becoming more effective and efficient as this environment provided opportunities for collaboration, critical analysis, argumentation, and discourse.

I hope that educators will see value in using this unit or a similar one within their classrooms. I also wish that my project may inspire others to create courses like *Ewrite* in their

own schools. I believe the unit plan provides enough structure and freedom for teachers that it could be modified to meet the curricular needs of their course.

Recommendations

In my teaching experience I have found students to be digitally literate, but that their literacy practices need to be deepened and developed. Young people are immersed in using multimodal digital texts in their free time and educators should to see this situation as a "teachable moment." All educators, regardless of which subjects they teach, ought to think multimodally when choosing material for their students to study and to create (Burstein, 2014). Teachers need to relate their teaching materials to the life skills and social interests of their students in order to prepare them for successful futures. Moreover, new media and new literacies affect people of all ages, thus teachers will be doing themselves a disservice, as well as their students, if they do not refine their own literacy practices.

Although views of literacy have expanded recently (Hagood, 2003; Lankshear & Nobel, 2003, 2009; Leu et al., 2007, 2014), much work still lies ahead in terms of researching media and online literacy as online literacy competencies continue to grow and change shape. Old and new perspectives regarding literacies needed to be studied and shared in interdisciplinary ways and the notions of 21st century literacy need to become an underlying premise of research rather than one which is continually argued (Hagood, 2003; Moje 2009). Ultimately, more research needs to be conducted regarding the integration of social media networks and applications at the middle school level. I trust that I have taken the first-step in reformulating my pedagogy, as I have approached the Master of Education program as a self-inquiry into the growing body of research that describes factors affecting the successful integration of digital literacy practices and put those into practice. Again, although much work needs to be done, I believe that I have initiated

the process. While it was difficult to find research specifically on these contemporary topics focused on this adolescent age group, as a result of my research, my Master of Education project was guided by the three main areas of the role of the teacher, student engagement, and critical thinking. Furthermore, although I felt that I could have continued to read the professional literature on these topics, I reluctantly understand that this topic is a contemporary area and I am part of the conversation and development that will continue in my own practice, and hopefully, with other educators.

Conclusion

In my teaching experience thus far, I have learned that if students are engaged and create their own learning experiences, they will not only retain information longer, but also will become more confident in their skills. Therefore, I am and will always be an advocate for the role of "teacher as facilitator." How one constructs his or her classroom environment and relationships ultimately reflects on students' learning process. Research into Vygotsky's (1962, 1978) social constructivism and Freire's (1970) critical pedagogy provided theoretical and conceptual frameworks for validating and supporting my current practices.

Ultimately, my goal as a teacher is to empower students to be lifelong learners and active citizens. By means of PBL teaching practices (BIE, 2013), which involve asking student-driven open-ended questions that invite more than simple recall, formative rather than evaluative feedback that informs and both leads and encourage forward thinking, and by discussion and argumentation that probe and challenge rather than unquestioningly accept, I am able to do so. When students participate in a new domain with new literacies in an active and dialogic way, rather than as a "passive" outsider, as many students in traditional teaching situations do, they learn to experience the world differently. These skills are crucial for students to learn as they

leave our classrooms and enter the outside world.

Although integrating new literacies such as social networks and apps may pose potential barriers, the advantages far exceed the possible difficulties. I believe that integrating the new literacies of social networks and apps to engage audiences and solve problems is the way of the future for education. If educators want students to be engaged while learning the necessary skills of the future, both technological and practical, social networks and applications are valuable resources. Traditionalists may scoff at the idea of using these forums to promote learning, because they mistakenly assume that online social networks and apps are a substitute for learning through classroom and book study. "Technology alone is not the answer" (Andes & Claggett, 2011, p. 350) and as explained and demonstrated in my proposed *Ewrite* project, social networks and apps should be used in conjunction with other curriculum materials and with prescribed learning outcomes in mind. Therefore, although there may be resistance, as there always is with new innovations, ultimately, the time and effort by educators and the value, I believe, will be seen in student critical thinking skills, engagement, motivation and therefore student output; all of which are worth the exploration. The integration of social networks and applications within the classroom can transform education and its clients; teachers need to be willing to refute the age-old axiom, "you teach the way you were taught" in order to co-construct knowledge WITH their students and to create authentic learning opportunities. This new learning environment and the meaningful context, I believe, will help students become life-long and more critical and efficient learners.

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