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Three stories from my recent experiences on Facebook (http://www.facebook.com/)—the social networking giant that now boasts upwards of 150 million users—serve to illustrate both the positive potential and the unsettling power of social networking tools. The first incident happened recently in my own university classroom. As part of my literature methods course, students must read three young adult novels of their choice for literature circles. I introduce a handful of my favorites and give students time to discuss possibilities with their classmates. This past semester, I overheard a telling conversation as they made their selections: "Let's just pick our first book," one student said, "and decide the rest on Facebook." Shortly thereafter, the students created a Facebook group to continue their discussion and finalize their choices.

The second story comes from my efforts to publish pieces of my dissertation. To do so, I needed to get permission from six former high school students whose work featured heavily in my research. Though all had graduated in 2002 and most had moved away for college and careers, I found all six on Facebook and within twelve hours had secured the necessary permissions. Two of them even *friended* me and wished me good luck on the publication.

The final anecdote is a cautionary tale: a California English teacher I know was reprimanded after posting a comment to her Facebook profile that criticized a major political figure in her school community. Though her job was never in jeopardy, she was upbraided by the school superintendent for lack of judgment and exhibiting poor character. The teacher felt compelled to delete her Facebook account immediately.

As these anecdotes suggest, many of our colleagues and most of our students are already on Facebook. A recent report conducted by the National School Board Association, for example, found that nearly three-quarters of nine to seventeen-year-olds use social networking tools at least once per week. What are they doing? Posting messages, sharing music, videos, and photos, blogging, and yes, even doing homework (1-2). Teachers and professors have followed the lead of their students, and while no one knows exactly how many educators have Facebook profiles, their presence there is redefining student-teacher relationships—and in some cases, straining them. "Is it weird and cheesy for professors to be on Facebook, sending social notes to their students after a long day at school?" asked Carla, a college student, in a recent article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (Toth 1). Other students, more direct in their opposition, have formed Facebook groups with titles such as, *I liked it better when Facebook was just for students* and *F-ing Facebook isn't for parents or professors!!!!*

Despite this resistance, however, the sheer popularity of Facebook among our students demands that we consider Carla's question, particularly since school districts may not have policies that govern teachers' online activities. Should teachers use Facebook or other social networking tools to connect with their students? And if so, how might we use social networking within the English language arts to support our teaching of literature and writing?

A Facebook Primer

Before addressing these questions, however, it may be helpful to explain what Facebook is and how it works. Created by Harvard-sophomore Mark Zuckerberg in 2004, the original purpose of the site was to digitize the Harvard student directory. When the site became wildly popular with the students—more than half signed up in the first month—Zuckerman extended Facebook to other Ivy league universities, then to all universities, then high schools, and finally, in September of 2006, to anyone with a valid email address. By then, Zuckerman had dropped out of

Harvard to run Facebook full-time, reportedly turning down a billion dollar offer for the company from Yahoo in 2006 (McGirt).

Facebook is one of the most popular channels in the new *social media*, a term used to describe online media where users share information in a many-to-many exchange, as opposed to the *broadcast media* (e.g., NBC Nightly News), which supply viewers with information following a one-to-many model. Any platform that allows participants to contribute, organize, or critique content might be put into this broad category. In addition to social networks such as Facebook, MySpace (http://www. myspace.com/) and Bebo (http://www.bebo.com/), the social media include photo and video-sharing sites such as Flickr (http:// www.flickr.com/), and YouTube (http://www.youtube.com/), and more broadly, blogs, podcasts, forums, and wikis.

What makes Facebook unique among the social media, however, is its remarkable versatility and, sometimes unsettling, transparency. These qualities are attributable to two decisions made by Zuckerman. In the spring of 2007, Facebook shared its technology with outside developers, who were quick to write their own applications for the social network. The resulting flood of applications means that in addition to the basic functions offered by most social networks—sharing videos, posting links, forming groups—Facebookers can choose from hundreds of ways to interact with other users. Popular applications include Causes, an application that lets users start, join, or donate to advocacy groups; Super Wall, a souped-up bulletin board where friends leave personalized messages; and Top Friends, a tool that allows users to rank their friends in order of importance. A typical Facebook user has dozens of applications plugged into her profile, providing endless social recreation and diversion.

An earlier decision by Zuckerman was more controversial: Facebook added new features the News Feed and the Mini-Feed—that many believed violated the privacy of users. These features, enabled by default, make your Facebook activities visible to your friends. So, if I change my status line, upload a new image to my profile, write a comment on someone's Super Wall, plug in an application, add a friend, or join a group, my Facebook friends get an automatic update of my activity via the News and Mini-Feeds. Zuckerman intended these features to give users a steady stream of social information, but many felt their private lives were being invaded. Facebook quickly added additional privacy measures—both the feeds can now be turned off—but even today, many Facebook users seem unaware that their online activities are watched by a much larger audience.

This last fact, coupled with the much-documented phenomenon of cyber-disinhibition, has caught many Facebook users in unexpected and embarrassing situations, as real-world friends, colleagues, and significant others witness dubious online activities (e.g., posting racy photos) that were never intended to be public. And this returns us to our original question: should educators join Facebook and risk such exposure? I think the answer is a confident—but qualified—yes.

Using Social Network Tools to Connect to Students

While Facebook carries risks for students and teachers alike, it also can forge unique connections between them when it is used responsibly. There is no shortage of research demonstrating how important it is for students to believe their teachers are interested in their lives, both in and out of school. In *Reading Don't Fix No Chevys*, for example, Michael W. Smith, Jeffrey Wilhelm, and Tom Newkirk find that adolescent boys want their teachers to get to know them, to care about them as individuals, and to pay attention to their interests. If the teacher fails to meet the terms of this "implicit social contract," boys will often refuse to learn. The authors cite the case of a student named Bambino, a wrestler whose work improved dramatically when his teachers spent just a few extra minutes talking to him about his sport (99). Brian White has also stressed the role of caring in literacy instruction, suggesting a specific pedagogy of caring that seeks to engage students even when they do not reciprocate (307).

Undeniably, Facebook offers us a new way to take interest in and care about our students by letting us learn more about their lives. If Bambino can be swayed with brief hallway conversations about wrestling, it seems likely that Facebook interaction would foster a similar rapport. Knowing what music our students favor, seeing what groups they participate in, perusing their lists of friends, and even viewing appropriate pictures of them could help us reach the kids in our classrooms. But do our students want us to be their Facebook friends?

For most high school students, the answer is

complicated. Some seem impressed when their teacher is savvy enough to use Facebook; some are surprised when teachers *friend* them on Facebook; and some maintain that teachers and students alike have the right to use Facebook or any other social networking

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site. What is clear, however, is that most high school students readily distinguish academic interaction with their teachers from the social exchanges they share with their peers. The following observations were made by students in the West Michigan high school where my wife, Lisa, teaches English. In response to the question originally posed by Carla ("Is it weird for teachers to contact their students on Facebook?"), they noted:

> When communicating for non-school reasons, I think it is weird. It may also be slightly suspicious. However, if it is school-related like a homework assignment then it might be okay. – Susan

> It is reasonable for teachers to communicate with students to help them with school, or so students can contact them instead of calling or emailing (nobody checks their email). Even if it is like, 'Hey, your poem or story was really good. I enjoyed reading it.' But if you are talking about personal things, that's a little weird. – Kerri

> Really old teachers shouldn't even have a Facebook. But once I asked a teacher about math on Facebook. – Dylan

These responses suggest that students understand the long-established boundaries between themselves and their teachers, both in real and virtual environments. When teachers cross these lines, students respond with skepticism and alarm. *Friending* a student on Facebook, in fact, might be likened to appearing unexpectedly at a popular student hangout. As Lisa's students observed:

> Teachers are a separate part of our life. They determine my GPA and an outside relationship/ Facebook is weird. – Kristy

> If a teacher posted on my wall, I would think it's sort of awkward that he was reaching farther than the typical student-teacher relationship. It's just weird to talk to someone outside of what you picture them in. – Mark

> A teacher would not want a student knowing everything about their life or even possibly judging them, and I know students definitely don't want teachers to have that privilege either. – Monica

Monica's comment expresses a contradiction that characterizes at least a segment of the Google generation. Raised on the Web, this generation is often less wary about publishing private information online and yet still clings to pre-Web standards of privacy, essentially expecting restraint and decency in an era of Facebook transparency. This contradiction is particularly evident when parents, teachers, or administrators police social networking sites to catch students involved in questionable behavior. Students reserve their greatest vehemence for such snooping, particularly when it results in punishment, as is often the case. Many members of the Facebook group *Facebook is for college and high school students not teachers and parents*, for example, vociferously protest being spied on by adults, while simultaneously asserting their right to post anything and everything with impunity. This paradox is recognized by wiser members of the group, who to their credit warn others to refrain from posting anything foolish.

What students seem to be suggesting, then, is that teachers may use Facebook for school-related purposes such as sharing resources or helping with an assignment, but that they should maintain a safe social distance from students and never use Facebook to spy on them. In the transparent environment of Facebook, however, acting like a teacher and acting like a voyeur are sometimes indistinguishable, and so to avoid making the transgressions your students will resent, I recommend the following guidelines.

Facebook Etiquette for Teachers	
Do	**Don't**
• Join Facebook or another social network. Taking part in an activity your students enjoy is one way of staying in touch with their culture and their concerns. Go and see what it is all about. • Discuss web safety and responsibility with your students. • Use Facebook to communicate academic information to your students. The easiest way of doing so is to set up a Facebook group for your class which does not require friending students and which functions much like a class bulletin board. Remind your students that any content they post to the class group must be school appropriate. • Pay attention to your privacy settings. By default, Facebook allows only your friends to see your profile. I also recommend allowing only your own friends (and not any larger networks you join) to see your Facebook activity. You may also want to make your profile unavailable to the Facebook search engine. • Establish a policy on friending students. To be safe, ignore friend requests from current students and avoid requesting friendship with them. Tell your students to look you up after they graduate.	• Post anything that may endanger you as a professional. This includes photos, videos, status lines, wall posts, and other information. Remember that your privacy settings can only protect you to a certain degree, and that social networking also happens in real life, particularly in close-knit school communities. If you overindulge on Friday night, in other words, don't post that you are hung-over on Saturday morning. • Use Facebook or another social network to catch students violating school rules or policies. Online policing is best left to parents and administrators. • Dismiss Facebook or other social networks as a fad, as a waste of time, or as a threat to teaching and learning. When used responsibly and creatively, social networking can afford students new learning opportunities. See suggestions below.

Social Networking in the English Language Arts

The idea of social networking should be nothing new to teachers of English language arts. After all, we are in the business of creating learning communities in our reading and writing classrooms. Perhaps more than any other discipline, English relies on social networks to get its work done. When we teach writing, we put students into peer response groups whose success depends on collaborative social relationships between writers (Bruffee 168). Literature circles, a popular methods of teaching literature in middle and high school, also institutes social networks of three or four students. These small networks meet periodically to form meaning from the texts they read (Daniels 42). Discussion of literary texts, both in large and small groups, is a social discourse that ideally involves a wide range of students making connections to one another in a democratic and constructive way (Christenbury 260).

Put more broadly, many of us have seen our classes fall apart when students refuse to network with their classmates, and the barriers between them too great to overcome, the silence just too seductive.

Social networks are also present *in* the literary works we teach. It seems obvious to observe that the great majority of canonical works concern human beings acting in relationships with one another—sometimes to spurn the wishes of their society (*Romeo and Juliet*), sometimes to survive in a cruel world (*Of Mice and Men*), and sometimes to find personal fulfillment (*Their Eyes were Watching God*). One canonical text that centers specifically on social networking is *The Great Gatsby*. To win back his love Daisy, Jay Gatsby amasses lists of friends and throws ostentatious parties with hundreds of guests, flaunting his newly acquired money and social status. Gatsby's public reinvention of himself, in fact, might be likened to creating

a Facebook profile: both involve positioning a version of yourself at the center of a social universe—and the more friends you win, the better.

Two of my students, David and Bethany, were quick to see the parallels between Gatsby's world and the sometimes superficial sphere of social networking. As part of a class assignment, they developed MySpace profiles for *Gatsby's* major characters. Each profile reflects the personal tastes of the character, examines his or her motivations, and provides insights into his or her relationships with other characters. On the profile David and Bethany designed for Jay Gatsby (http://myspace.com/jamesjaygatsby), Jay uses the *about me* feature to reassert his fabricated identity: "I'm an Oxford man and a veteran war hero. I've spent my days wandering about the world like a young rajah." His *interests* include, "Throwing extravagant parties. Taking scenic drives. Gazing at the green light on the end of Daisy Buchanan's dock." Careful viewers will also note that the narrator, Nick, has left a *testimonial* that seems to respond to a request made by Gatsby: "Why does it have to come through Miss Baker?" asks Nick, "I don't like mysteries." Jumping to Nick's profile reveals that Gatsby has indeed made a mysterious appeal to Nick: "I've got a large favor to ask you, old sport," Jay writes on Nick's page. "Miss Baker has kindly consented to speak to you about it this afternoon." Readers of *Gatsby* will of course know what this favor entails.

Other commonly taught literary works would also work well on MySpace or Facebook. Students might create profiles for the mythological characters from the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad*, detailing their complicated back-stories and intertwined relationships. *Lord of the Flies* could yield a very interesting social network that would shift as the novel progressed: Ralph might begin with a long list of friends but lose them as Jack and the hunters leech away his former allies. Social networking can even work as a tool for literary analysis when the technology itself is unavailable. If your school blocks MySpace and Facebook (as many schools do), consider asking students to create paper-based profiles for characters—thus drawing on students' familiarity with these tools—as my wife, Lisa, recently did while teaching *Much Ado about Nothing*. Her students took to this task immediately, drawing convincing profiles for the main characters of the play, including this one for Leonato, the governor of Messina and father of Hero.

[See Appendix – Leonato Facebook Figure]

Those familiar with the comedy will recognize that the students—Erica, Lannie, David, and Chris—understand the character of Leonato. First, they realize his political and social importance: he has thirty messages in his inbox, 468 friends in Messina, and even has sixty-seven contacts outside of Messina. They also see that he has certain social responsibilities, including attending the masquerade, Hero and Claudio's wedding, and a "Messina Leadership Meeting" invented by the students. And though Leonato is a somewhat minor character, his key role in tricking Benedick and Beatrice into love also comes through on his profile—Leonato joins the "Get Beatrice and Benedick together!" group. As Benedick himself notes about Leonato, "I should think this a gull but that the / white-bearded fellow speaks it. Knavery cannot, /sure, hide himself in such reverence (2.3.126-128, 71). The paper profiles were posted around the room, creating a visual social network of the characters of *Much Ado* and generating interest in the play.

Safe Spaces: Academic Social Networks
If Facebook and MySpace are the Wild West of social networking, rich with potential but fraught with peril, then alternative services such as Ning (http://www.ning.com/) are the suburbs—safe, gated communities that offer many of the same features as their woollier counterparts with none of the risk. Ning, a free service, allows you to create your own social network, designate it as public or private, and invite whomever you please. I used Ning to develop a social network (called *Teach English*) for pre-service teachers in my methods courses. So far, my students have used the network to share lesson plans and other resources, to construct professional profiles, and to discuss issues related to secondary English education. On my invitation—Teach English is a private network—students from two other Michigan universities joined us, resulting in conversations that crossed institutional boundaries. I also invited current interns, experienced secondary teachers, and a handful of English and English education professors to our network.

There are currently over one hundred members, and my hope is that the site will foster constructive relationships between novice and veteran teachers.

High school English classes might also benefit from a private social network. Students could use the space to publish writing, critique peer work, share resources, post audio and video projects, hold discussions, develop character profiles, and even play word games. Teachers could make announcements, respond to student writing, archive class documents, and invite experts from the field to enter conversations about literature. Moreover, teachers could open the network to multiple grade levels and even students from other schools.

Ning is just one of several attractive options for creating a private social network (see the resource list at the end of this article for more). Many of these services provide helpful resources for educators and will remove the advertisements that ordinarily appear on these sites for no charge. For teachers interested in social networking but wary of MySpace and Facebook, such services may be the best solution. In these more comfortable if sanitized environments, boundaries between academic interaction and socializing may be clearly drawn; accidental disclosure of personal information is less likely; and connections between students and teachers can still be made.

Regardless of how we use social networking in our English classrooms—as a means of communicating, a motivational tool, a useful new venue for written assignments, or even a metaphor for understanding—it is clearly in our best interest to check it out. I have only hinted here at the pedagogical opportunities afforded by social networking technologies. These opportunities, limited only by our imaginations, will multiply as social networks extend their reach, further redefine privacy, and weave themselves more inextricably into the fabric of adolescent and adult life. Today and tomorrow, our students will be networked. Perhaps their teachers should be as well.

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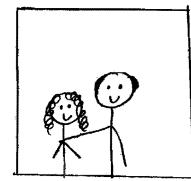
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Appendix - Social Networking Tools

Campusbug (www.campusbug.com), Imbee (www:imbee.com), Ning (www.ning.com) are free social network services that teachers can use to create social networks for their students. Ning has helpful educational resources at www.education.ning.com. For an index of similar sites, see the article "Nine Ways to Build your Own Social Network" at *TechCrunch* (www.techcrunch.com).

About the Author

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Leonato
is busy.

Name: Leonato
Birthday: 1560
Gender: male
Networks: Messina
Relationship status: It's complicated

Mini-Feed

Leonato has become friends with Claudio

Leonato is planning on attending
  Hero and Claudio's wedding
  Messina Leadership meeting
  Masquerade

Leonato has joined Get Beatrice and Benedick Together! group.

Leonato added an Album

The Prince's Arrival
added Yesterday

Information:

Activities: parties, finding a husband for Hero and Beatrice,
Interests: spending time with family + friends
About me: I am the governor of Messina.

Wall   2,031 posts

Don Pedro wrote

  I owe you big time for everything you've done and a great time at your house!

Hero wrote

  Hi Dad! Have a nice day!

Claudio wrote

  I can't thank you enough for letting me marry your daughter.

Friends

In Messina: 468
In other networks: 67

Albums 2 of 7

  Family

  A day at work

Groups

Get Beatrice and Benedick Together • Don Pedro Fan Club • Messina is The Best •