DIGITAL WILDFIRES: Tending to Social Media in the ELA Classroom

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> For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house.
>
> —AUDRE LORDE (1983)

AS THE INTERNET BECOMES the primary source of information for most, a perfect storm has erupted around the ways in which networked publics consume and critique information online. The internet and social media apps are integral to society, research, and learning today, but increasingly, we are questioning the trustworthiness of digital information. It is clear that even as ordinary citizens are expected to be digitally literate, they are facing an unprecedented challenge. They are now being called on to weigh and evaluate the accuracy, reliability, and authenticity of public pronouncements and news reports as rival entities propagate "alternative facts" online. Unequipped to engage with digital information at the level now needed, many individuals are unable or unwilling to perform basic aspects of personal citizenry (Falco and Kleinhnas).

There is also a history of the need for critical media and digital literacy education and integration that predates this current situation (see Bacalja, Aguilera, and Castrillón-Ángel for a review). The challenge is that the development and dissemination of demonstrably false information online becomes faster, easier, and more targeted (Schneier; Saurwein and Spencer-Smith). Critical evaluation of information is a global phenomenon as most individuals connect with digital friends more than their next-door neighbors. These challenges in critical media literacy are extended around the globe as individuals interact in networked publics. Ultimately social networks and digital spaces become "cesspools of misinformation" (Frish and Greenbaum 19) where digital wildfires wreak havoc in the real world (Howell).

There are many examples of the impact of these digital wildfires on the lives of citizens around the globe. These include controversial topics like vaccinations (Bessi et al.; Lewandowsky et al.), gun violence (Arndt and Tesar), video game violence (Nauroth et al., "Games Against Science" and "Social Identity Threat Motivates Science-Discrediting"), climate change (Van der Linden et al.), and COVID-19 (Roozenbeek et al.). Research suggests that the problem with misinformation is that when people have heard it, they tend to believe and act on it, even after it's been corrected (Sellnow et al.). In this scenario, "the master's tools" function as vehicles that transport information within sociotechnical spaces. However, the tools as they currently exist lack the infrastructure and incentive to vet the information that is being circulated. Thus, multiple vehicles appear to carry information about the same topic without regard to the accuracy of that information. In this process, the tools that are needed to disrupt and dismantle the system of disinformation are used to

fortify its structure (Trevor). We must ask ourselves, how bad is the current situation, and how much worse can it get? Who is responsible for this situation, and who needs to address the challenges? Last, what are some things we can do right now with students to build the necessary critical media literacy skills they'll need to participate actively and immediately in their futures?

Understanding Digital Wildfires

One of the first challenges in understanding the current situation is that educators and researchers need to stop viewing this as primarily an academic exercise. In truth, society may currently be engaged in a full-scale online informational war (Paul and Matthews). Most of the critical media literacy that is taught in our classrooms shows a misunderstanding of sources and messages involved and is in no way commensurate with the threat we face. This online informational war in the digital age has many permutations, but one of these is especially relevant to this current discussion about critical evaluation in online spaces. This war is marked by a current context of sources of online content that are actively pumping out information with varying shades of truth and sincerity. Along with the original source that may be mostly true, there will be dozens (or more) of additional sources with information that is more or less true. This information is presented with varying perspectives or ideological stances to further obfuscate and confuse readers.

This is exacerbated as bad (and unwitting) actors seek to exploit this situation. The World Economic Forum (WEF) identified the spread of misinformation and fake news as among the world's top global risks (World Economic Forum). Fake News is defined as "the deliberate creation and sharing of false and/or manipulated information that is intended to deceive and mislead audiences, either for the purposes of causing harm or for political, personal, or financial gain. (House of Commons Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee 7). The creation and dissemination of fake news encompass state-sponsored bad actors, motivated by ideology or simply plain profit. It is important to

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note that even the term *fake news* may be problematic in the classroom as students' epistemic beliefs may negatively impact the evaluation of content (Hämäläinen et al.). From an educational perspective, one possible way to address this in the classroom is to have students examine the content and intent of the creator or sender, and the audience that will interact with these signals online (Zucker).

Critical examination of online content includes a review of the credibility and relevance of the information presented (Marttunen et al.). Credibility is identified as the consideration of the perceived expertise and trustworthiness of the author (Judd et al.) as well as the reliability of information presented online (Kiili et al.). A review of the credibility of online information contains evaluations of the author, source of claim, bias, content, argument, and accuracy (Kiili et al.). Relevance is identified as the consideration of the perceived importance and currency of the information presented online (Judd et al.) or judgments about the essential nature of information in relation to the task (Kiili et al.) A review of the relevance of online information contains evaluations of relevance of topic, website, purpose, and currency (Kiili et al.).

The challenge with focusing on the credibility, truthfulness and relevance, or usefulness of online information is that most of this review exists in the eye of the beholder. When students evaluate the argumentation and sincerity of online information (Brem and Weems), critical evaluation has been shown to be a situated activity (Andrade). As individuals review and assess online information, they're considering the varied contexts, contents, and contingencies that surround the information, as well as factoring in their own epistemological stance (Barzilai and Zohar). This becomes quite the task as online readers need to contemporaneously evaluate truth, relevance, quality, impact, and claims made while evaluating the usefulness of the information (Graesser et al.).

To address these challenges, it can be helpful to further evaluate online information by considering the perceived sincerity of the creator or sender of the information. This includes an examination of whether this is misinformation or disinformation (Karlova and Fisher). *Misinformation* is defined as false information that is spread, regardless of whether there is intent to mislead (van der Linden; Lazer et al.). Misinformation is sometimes considered

to be unintentional sharing. When people spread *misinformation*, they often believe the information they are sharing. *Disinformation* is defined as deliberately misleading or biased information, manipulated narrative or facts, or propaganda (Lazer et al.). Disinformation is considered to be the intentional creation or sharing of false or misleading information. Disinformation is often shared with the goal of misleading others (Fallis).

Taming Digital Wildfires

To be digitally literate is to have the ability to read, write, and think critically across digital spaces. According to Lankshear and Knobel, digital literacies are understood as "myriad social practices and conceptions of engaging in meaning-making mediated by texts that are produced, received, distributed, exchanged via digital codification" (5). Maintaining one's online presence is absolutely essential in the twenty-first century for legal, employment, and financial reasons, as well as for personal safety. Being digitally literate, then, requires one to view online and technological spaces as text requiring criticality, understanding, questioning, and meaning. To prepare students to enter a global marketplace and be digitally literate requires a focus on critical media literacy and four specific actions, stemming from both our independent work in the field of critical media literacy and our collective work as Initiative for Literacy in a Digital Age Divergent Award winners (initiativefor21research.org), including skills of prebunking (Goering), problematizing (Haddix et al.), participating (Crandall et al.), and policymaking (Morrell) that we've learned to name through our collaborations.

PREBUNKING

There are various ways that research suggests that countering misinformation may be successful (Kirchner and Reuter). Most of the research indicates that it can be a challenge to address or debunk misinformation once an individual has come into contact with it (Scheufele and Krause). A much more effective way to deal with misinformation is to present students with a small dose in a classroom, explain how they might have been misled, and then try to inoculate them (Van der Linden et al.). Instead of debunking, prebunking may provide an opportunity to neutralize the impact of future misinformation on learners (Jolley and Douglas). Prebunking

may provide a powerful way to help motivate learning in the classroom, but there is a need to continue to support this learning as students head outside of the classroom (Hameleers).

Educators can teach prebunking in action with an examination of the paratexts, peritexts, and epitexts surrounding the contextual factors of information (Witte et al.). Using a 5Ws Lens Think-Aloud activity, enlisting a Who, What, When, Where, and Why lens, can offer learners a location to examine the context of the information:

- Who is sending the information and for whom is the message intended?;

- What are the conditions in which the information is being sent, and what does the information contain?;

- When was the information produced, and what is its relationship to the present time?;

- Where is this information located and/or sourced?; and

- What are individuals intending by the messages being sent? (perhaps the greatest prebunking lens).

PROBLEMATIZING

One of the challenges in dealing with misinformation and disinformation in our classrooms is that there is a high likelihood that this information will be accompanied by a wide variety of perspectives from pop culture, home, and community (Mihailidis and Viotty). If educators want to build critical media literacy skills in digital contexts, they need to address the culture, bias, and microaggressions that may be found in these contexts (Cherner and Curry; Robinson et al.). If we want students to be agents of change, we need to support them when they see wrongdoing and act to combat it (Haslam). Thankfully, we have a lot of guidance on how students can call out alternative facts as they see them online (Cooper). One way to interrupt bias in community interactions is to *call someone out* when the actions or messages are incorrect or harmful (Carter et al.). Conversely, there is an opportunity to *call someone in* when there is an opportunity to make deeper connections, understand different perspectives, or encourage paradigm shifts (Milner). It is important to note that developing a *call in* or *call out* culture is different than a *cancel culture* (Clark). If youth seek to develop an online

space that builds empathy, educates others, and champions social justice, educators need to provide instructional opportunities to develop practices that reflect that vision (Theoharis; Sobre).

Problematizing in action can be practiced by learners through critical dialogue opportunities and student-centered discussions such as Socratic Circles (Thomas and Goering). Copeland developed the discussion-feedback-reverse-pattern to allow for participants to practice not only the skills of speaking and critical thinking and analysis, but also listening and offering critical feedback to those speaking and analyzing, offering opportunities to agree and disagree orally. Student-led whole class approaches to dissecting text act as an immediate system of checks and balances for the interpretations that students make, and whether the text at hand is an advertisement, a poem, a television commercial, a news story, or a song lyric, skills can be modeled, practiced, and gained. These processes have the opportunity to function as one of many dialogic tools (Juzwik et al.).

PARTICIPATING

Ultimately, developing some inoculation against misinformation and calling out bad behaviors will go only so far. Youth need to practice these digital literacies in a digitally literate environment of their own (O'Byrne & Pytash; Hicks and Schoenborn) and need opportunities to test out culturally responsive, critical digital media literacy practices in online environments and be mentored by peers and adults (Crandall, et al.; Thomas and Warren). There is a need to develop a nuanced pedagogy that embeds intersectionality, technosocial spaces, and identity construction with youth (Scott et al.), including racial literacies (Price-Dennis and Sealey-Ruiz). Social connectedness and accessibility to online spaces content is a hallmark of participatory culture (Jenkins), yet we must ask if all individuals are allowed to freely participate, communicate, exchange information, and create content they believe is meaningful (Garcia et al.; Muhammad and Womack). Teachers need to use these questions and conflicts as an opportunity to reflect with students as they study membership structures and power hierarchies in their lives. This dialogue provides a starting point as youth seek opportunities to not only call out misinformation but perhaps reshape narratives to better reflect perspectives that are routinely marginalized or silenced (Price-Dennis; Stornaiuolo and Thomas, "Disrupting Educational Inequalties" and "Restorying as Political Action").

As an example, in Connecticut, eight teachers worked with students at their school to promote digital compositions after participating together in a National Writing Project summer institute. These teachers, who represented urban, rural, and suburban schools, were given an opportunity to read Matt de la Peña's *We Were Here* and to respond to a cross-district essential question, "Why are you here?". Teachers spent the year discussing authenticity, rhetorical devices, reliable resourcing, voice, genre, and purpose and offered students choice in how they wished to respond to the prompt. Students became an audience for other students and gathered at a *Writing Our Lives—Digital Ubuntu* conference (Crandall et al.) to present their writing to one another. The conference itself acted as a conduit for democracy, and students across schools representing socioeconomics, zip codes, lived experiences, and cultures viewed themselves as writers participating together in projects to take action.

POLICYMAKING

Last, we need to understand that these misinformation and disinformation systems are fundamentally rooted in power (Price-Dennis and Sealey-Ruiz; Kuo and Marwick). Just as we indicated that there is a need to prebunk against misinformation and problematize these forces while participating with others, this battle is ultimately about power and inequality (Price-Dennis and Sealey-Ruiz). Disinformation campaigns are false or misleading information that is intentionally shared for profit, to harm others, or to further political or ideological goals (Freelon and Wells). As society seeks to rebuild and reify existing power structures in digital contexts, we need to pay attention to who benefits and why (Chakravartty et al.)). To effectively disrupt or reframe these power structures and inequities, there is a need to address the responsibility of the individual developers and corporations that create and connect these systems (Picower). We believe there is an opportunity to develop solidarity between the average citizen and the technologists that dream up these advances (Haraway). Digital systems and processes cannot be allowed to create new modes of surveillance and control in and out of our classrooms (Williams; Gilliard). Educators and youth need to be supported by

policy as they center examinations of power across historical and ideological perspectives.

It can sometimes be a challenge to support educators and students as they craft and curate voices as they extend beyond the classroom walls (Lyiscott et al.). Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) draws on critical sociocultural theories and cultural studies to engage students and educators in an effort to broaden the efforts of inquiry-based knowledge production (Caraballo and Lyiscott). Caraballo and others identify four points of entry for YPAR: academic learning and literacies, cultural and critical epistemologies, development of youth, and youth and civic organizing and engagement. DeJaynes, Cortes, and Hoque provide an example of this as they work with youth to understand the impact of high stakes testing on educational inequalities. Guided by teachers and researchers, high school students are positioned as experts to critique and confront social inequalities within their school and beyond. Examples like this provide opportunities to understand the power of finding allies in peers and educators, the possibilities involved in deep participation (Nos Aldás and Pinazo), and the time necessary to enact social change.

Conclusion

Tim Berners Lee, the father of the internet stated,

> While the web has created opportunity, given marginalized groups a voice, and made our daily lives easier, it has also created an opportunity for scammers, given a voice to those who spread hatred, and made all kinds of crime easier to commit. (Berners-Lee)

Ultimately a mix of real, hoax and more reliable/less reliable sites compete for your attention (Karlova and Fisher). One's awareness is gobbled up as a stream of information and media compete for this attention (Vicario et al.). Individuals just get confused and shut down. The end result is that we find ourselves in echo chambers or "filter bubbles" that ensure we get more of what we like (Wu et al.).

Yet, in an increasingly networked, global society, conflict can reach our browsers, learning environments, and, in turn, our students far more quickly than previously conceived. This perspective requires that we move beyond naive considerations of digital dualism and instead understand the role that educators play as citizens in a global, digital community

TEACHING TIPS

W. Ian O'Byrne and his colleagues challenge educators to stand up to the threat of "digital wildfires" by equipping students with four critical media literacy skills: prebunking, problematizing, participating, and policymaking. This chapter also references Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR), which many teachers are employing to bring critical media literacy to life in their classrooms. Consider trying a YPAR project. Work with your students to identify and carry out an action research project that uses the points of entry identified here: academics, cultural, development of youth, and civic organizing.

(Journell; Jurgenson). The barriers between the online and offline worlds are less distinct than we often frame them. We also need to acknowledge our fractured civic and digital systems and develop culturally relevant media literacy practices to support our communities (Mirra et al.). As schools and classrooms increasingly move to online and hybrid spaces, we must consider how we protect students and educators when learning environments are just a click away. There are social, political, and professional initiatives that need to address this situation if, and when, society believes that it is important. This chapter provides a call to action to adequately inform educators about the current milieu and to identify better possible futures. ▪

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