The Socially Networked Classroom

Teaching in the NEW MEDIA AGE

William Kist

Foreword by
Kylene Beers

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藏书章

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Foreword

Preparing Students for a World Gone Flat

One year and seven months ago, I was asked a question by a high school principal. I couldn't answer his question then. Now, finally, I can.

* * *

I'm often in schools, mostly middle schools and high schools, and while there I find the opportunity to have some one-on-one time with the principal. When that happens, I will invariably ask him or her my favorite question: "What type of student will *not* do well in this school?"

I like the question because it always catches principals by surprise, something that's generally hard to do. They expect the what-type-of-student-*will*-do-well question and have that answer down pat: "Students who are willing to work hard in the classroom and participate in any of our many extracurricular activities and be good citizens will do fine. . . ." But to consider who *won't* be successful in the school, one must see the school from another point of view. One very honest principal in a large urban high school took his time with this question and finally answered, "Now that you have me thinking about it, I don't think this school would be good for a student who needs big blocks of time to process information." I asked why, and he explained, "We're still working off a factory model of education, moving kids quickly from one class to the next every 42 minutes with no processing time between classes just so we can get them in and out of seven classes during the day. I think that could be a hard way to learn for some kids."

We both sat quietly in his small office, looking out the window to the school's athletic field where kids were running laps. After a moment, he continued, "Is there even any research that says that 42 minutes is enough to learn anything meaningful?" We talked about the lack of research that supports why a class period is any particular length of time and then sat

thinking about the things we do in schools that don't make much sense. Eventually, he added, "Actually, it's not just that we run this school by a bell system—something straight from the factory whistle that ushered workers back to work after breaks—but that our entire model for education comes from the industrial age. During that time, making sure each person on the assembly line could handle discreet skills was important. That's what we're doing here today in this school—making sure these kids can all handle discreet skills. I'm not sure we ever try to give them the big picture or, more important, get them to create the big picture themselves. We're teaching kids to pass a test, but I don't think we're making sure they can be competitive in the world they'll live in for the next 40, 50 years." He paused, but before I could respond, he jumped back in: "Let me answer your question again. Who won't do well in this school? Anyone wanting an education that is truly preparation for this flat world."[1]

* * *

This principal was far more honest than most and probably offered too strong an indictment of his school. But, as our conversation continued, it became apparent that the students were attending a school that looked much like the school the principal attended some 35 years ago when he was in high school. Desks were still, more often than not, in rows. Metal file cabinets still sat by classroom doors. And while chalk had been replaced with erasable markers and blackboards had become white boards, teachers still used the wall as the primary teaching tool. Collaboration was still about talking with the person behind you, and publishing work was about hanging it in the hallway. Sure, in this high school there were computers in every classroom, but they were mainly used for word processing or for viewing a Web site the teacher had found. The overhead projector was now an LCD projector, and the mimeographed worksheet had given way to the photocopied worksheet, while transparencies had been put aside for PowerPoint presentations. But those changes had not affected the "show-and-tell philosophy" (to borrow the principal's words) of most of the teachers: "The teachers show the kids what they want them to know, and the kids tell it back to them on the test."

In this school, smart phones and iPods were off limits; few teachers encouraged students to blog; fewer used classroom wikis as a way to work collaboratively; and none were using tools such as Google Docs, Twitter, Diigo, or Del.icio.us. The principal concluded, "We're creating another generation of students who know how to consume information, when what we need to be nurturing is a generation that knows how to produce new ideas." Then he asked me a question: "I've got a little money. What

[1] He's referring to Thomas Friedman's *The World Is Flat* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005).

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book would you suggest I buy for my faculty so that we can all learn how to better prepare our students for this flat world?"

I thought of some titles, but none of them were just right. None of the books painted a rich enough description of how to transform a classroom into a 21st-century room. None of them offered the details needed to provide the confidence one needs when attempting new instructional strategies that use new tech tools. None of them blended old technologies (paper and pen) with new technologies (blogs and wikis), with assessment rubrics I could use tomorrow. None of them allowed each of us to be at a different place on the continuum of learning as we entered the book. None of them did that because none of them were *this* book.

* * *

This book asks us if the social interactivity of the Web—Web 2.0—has "transformed the way we 'do' school," and then shows us, with care and specificity, the way to transform our schools. If you're a novice, you'll want to start with the "Short" and "Tall" chapters (think Starbucks coffee). If you've been thinking about new literacies for a while, then you can head to the "Grande" chapter. If you're thinking about writing your own book, then you'll turn to the "Venti" chapter. No matter the chapter, you'll find excellent ideas. As Bill points out, the coffee in Starbucks is the same whether the cup size is small or large. The difference is the amount. That's the difference you'll find in the various chapters. If you're only beginning to think about social networking in your classroom, the suggestions in the "Short" chapter will be perfect for you.

Regardless of the chapter, Bill asks us to consider what happens when our classrooms become as big as the world. I would change the question a bit to echo the question I asked the principal: "What happens when our classrooms *do not* become as big as the world?" I suggest that one result might be a diminished educational experience that in all likelihood prepares students to pass state-mandated tests but probably doesn't prepare them for living in a global economy, for living in a world gone flat. We need to transform the way we do school because the digitalization of information and automation of jobs has transformed the way we socialize and work. All too often I hear administrators, teachers, or parents say that kids just need the basics; or worse, I hear them say that underachieving students need the basics. When I asked one principal to define "basics," he said, "You know. Reading and writing. Good solid basics." I reminded him that at one time in this country a basic level of literacy was the ability to sign one's name. "*That* basic?" I asked. He said that was ridiculous because, "of course, what is now basic has changed."

And that's the point. What's *basic* has changed. Change is rarely easy. If you are old enough to sing the first few lines of "Tie a Yellow Ribbon Round an Old Oak Tree," then you'll remember using the big film projectors in a classroom. (And if you aren't old enough to sing along, then you

understand immediately the importance of prior knowledge.) The film would break, and we would hope for a 14-year-old in the classroom who could splice it and get the film started again. None of us would embrace that technology today, yet many of us wondered about bringing VCRs and then DVDs into the classroom when that technology emerged. And now, we wonder again with YouTube and streaming news. We hesitate to go forward, and yet, once there, we would not go backward.

Early in this book, Bill tells us that, as he considered his own teaching, he realized that "not only did I need to 'walk the walk,' I needed to pick up the pace." Picking up the pace will mean different things for different readers, and Bill recognizes that. So, no matter where you are on your own journey of creating a "socially networked classroom," you'll find the chapter that fits your needs. Each chapter is filled with rich descriptions, detailed explanations of activities, and rubrics that help us assess student work. More than that, though, each chapter offers us a glimpse of what it could mean to create a classroom as big as the world. That's the real reason this book is the answer to the principal's question. I suspect you'll find it answers many of your questions, too.

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This book would not exist without the encouragement of Carol Chambers Collins, acquisitions editor for Corwin. Carol edited my first book at Teachers College Press, and when we met at the National Council of Teachers of English Annual Convention in November of 2007 in New York, she suggested I might want to do another book, this time focusing on social networking in classrooms. I was hesitant because I was working on some other projects at the time and moving through a change in the courses I was teaching, but with the encouragement of my wife, Stephanie, I decided to take Carol's suggestion and start exploring the writing of another book. I'm so glad I did because this decision sent me down a path not only of learning about teachers who are using Web 2.0 in their classrooms but also of reconsidering my own teaching in light of what I was learning. Carol has not only made my copy read better, but she has also informed my scholarship.

In examining this book and all of the different projects and activities I've done over the years, I've realized more than ever the debt I owe to my current and former students—high school students and both preservice and inservice teachers with whom I've worked. Their willingness to plunge in and give these ideas a chance has helped refine and enrich my work.

Finally, I have to acknowledge the teachers I have profiled in this book and who have formed the major subject of most of my earlier writings as well. Their courage inspires me and, I feel, will be viewed decades from now as forming the foundation of a new way of doing school.

Links for Some Educators Profiled in This Book

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http://youthvoices.net/home

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Blog: http://ncte-ama.blogspot.com
www.frankwbaker.com

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www.kycohio.org

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missboeser.googlepages
.com

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www.noeltigers.com

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http://edtechteacher.org

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http://remoteaccess.typepad.com

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http://helcat.org/wordpress

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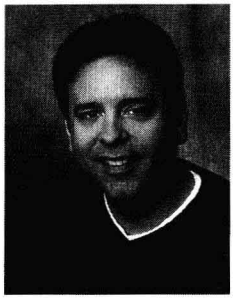

William Kist is an associate professor at Kent State University, where he teaches literacy education courses at the graduate and undergraduate levels. A former high school English teacher, Bill has presented nationally and internationally, with over 40 articles and book chapters to his credit; his profiles of pioneering teachers comprised his book *New Literacies in Action* (2005). In November 2007, Bill began a three-year term as director of the Commission on Media for the National Council of Teachers of English. Bill continues to work in video and film and has earned a regional Emmy nomination for Outstanding Music Composition. He blogs at www.williamkist.com and can be followed on Twitter at http://twitter.com/williamkist.

To all the teachers profiled in this book
And
To Stephanie (who forms, with me, my favorite social network),
I dedicate this book.

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1

The Writing Is on the Screen

Social Networking Is Here to Stay

Picture intermission at a Broadway show. The curtain has just come down after a rousing end-of-Act-One number. The lights are coming up. Suddenly, almost in unison, many people in the audience reach in their pockets or purses and flip open cell phones. Immediately, there is the sound in the air of various versions of the burning questions that seem to be on everyone's mind: "Where are you?" or "What are you doing?"

Picture afterschool at an elementary school somewhere in the Midwest. The kids are racing for their book bags and coats. As they make their way out of the building, a metamorphosis occurs as they whip out cell phones, Blackberries, iPods, and even laptops. The kids are getting back in touch with the world after hours of forced disconnect.

Picture a woman giving birth. She is in the last stages of labor and surrounded by medical staff and a loving husband who winces at her occasional cries. Periodically, between contractions, she reaches for her cell phone and posts a message to Twitter, providing her followers an account of the debut of her new son.

Variations of these pictures are taking place throughout the world at an astounding pace. One could make the argument that never before have we been more connected. The Internet has always been interactive in nature, but this latest iteration of the Internet (known as "Web 2.0") has

featured an intensified level of what has come to be called "social networking." This kind of community building across interest groups, demographics, and nationalities has transformed the way we connect with strangers, loved ones, friends, colleagues, and even ourselves.

But has it transformed the way we "do" school? Attempting to answer this question is the goal of this book. How are teachers and students incorporating these new literacies that add an intensified level of social networking into their classrooms? What happens when our classrooms become as big as the world?

Terminology and Trends

What exactly do I mean by "new literacies" and "social networking"? Ah, there is the rub. We have multiple terms for these multiple literacies, and while everyone seems to know what we're talking about, no one seems to be able to agree upon what to call it. Whatever we call these new ways of communicating (new literacies, multiliteracies, ICT, media literacy, digital literacies, or multimodalities, to name a few terms being used currently), it's clear that we are experiencing a vast transformation of the way we "read" and "write," and a broadening of the way we conceptualize "literacy." As Gunther Kress (2003) has described, we are going from a page-based society to a screen-based society—a great deal of the reading and writing we do today is on a computer screen, and the texts we are accessing there include not only print communication but also elements of graphic design, video, sound, visual art, and even advertising (thus making them "multimodal"). For purposes of clarity in this book, the terms "new literacies" and "new media" will be used interchangeably to suggest not only the multimodality of today's communication forms but also the interactivity that is embedded in them—these are essentially screen-based literacies.

social networking

When I use the term *social networking* in this book, I will intend it to mean the kind of communication that takes place online using some kind of platform (Web site) such as Facebook, Twitter, or Ning in which people can place messages and connect with others who are on the Web site. These platforms usually require each participant to publish a "profile" that usually includes a picture of the participant as well as any personal details the participant wants to share, thus forming an online identity that can be wholly created by the participant. The "networking" part of social networking comes from the fact that these platforms usually involve some kind of grouping or categorization system so that we all become participants in a kind of "Kevin Bacon Game," connecting to many various "friends" and "followers" in different ways and forming networks that range in size and scope from the very small and personal to the vast, international, and professional.

These new media often allow for a great deal of interactivity (social networking); for instance, readers are able to shape a text as it is collaboratively written (even as they are simultaneously instant messaging 10 of their friends and commenting on Twitter or Facebook as to how things are going). According to the Pew Internet and American Life Project (2008), 62% of Americans are

> part of a wireless, mobile population that participates in digital activities away from home or work. Teens are creating and sharing material on the Internet in greater numbers, with 28% of online teens maintaining their own blogs. . . . Virtually, all American teens play computer, console, or cell phone games and . . . the gaming experience is rich and varied, with a significant amount of social interaction and potential for civic engagement. (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2008)

People are tethering themselves to each other, crisscrossing the Web as they Twitter everything from the mundane to the sublime.

Twitter

Twitter is an online social network that asks participants to update their "followers" as to what they are doing in fewer than 140 characters. Some "twits" choose to "tweet" many times a day to hundreds, sometimes thousands, of followers.

SELECTED TWITTER QUOTES, 2008

- I can feel my pulse through my eye.
- What a disappointing poptart.
- I love the smell of pineapple juice.
- Just finished mowing my lawn . . . half the clippings seem to have made it into my shoes or gotten in my nose.
- Debating whether i should go to the pool today or relax in air conditioning . . . what do you think?
- 2 days till i leave for africa; 1000 things to do; new school head etc. all want mtings; am hit with worst gastro illness in memory! blah
- Tearing myself away from the computer for a bit to eat a late dinner and change out of work clothes.
- Trying to decide whether to go grocery shopping or bowling or both.
- So now that I'm using it, let me be the 400th to confirm that yes, Google apps run very fast in Chrome.
- Okay, I need to calm down. I've only been using this thing for like 20 minutes, but I'm ready to scream I like it so much.
- Baby is head down! Starting to induce.

Many of us are familiar with MySpace and Facebook—popular social networking platforms on which people post their pictures and connect with friends as well as strangers. But it also seems that most major Web sites today have some kind of sharing function, whether it's "Listmania" on Amazon, in which people make lists of book titles for different categories, or forums for discussion on YouTube, Blockbuster, Ustream, and the Internet Movie Database; on the latter, you can find discussions on everything from whether a certain actor is going bald to whether the ending of a certain film makes sense. All these spaces allow for some community to form, even if for only a few seconds. One could make the argument that today's kids are more connected to other people on a second-by-second basis than they have been at any other time in our history. These ties that bind are getting broader and more far-reaching.

The kids are definitely not alone. But we want to know whom they're not alone with—it's fine to be connected as long as they're not connecting to people who mean them harm. This fear factor may be a major reason why the social networking aspects of Web 2.0 haven't infiltrated their way into today's classroom and why they remain mainly afterschool activities (except in some of the classrooms in this book). The children are increasingly leaving our watchful care without even leaving home. They are "meeting" and talking with people whom they will probably never meet face-to-face. This is a frightening idea to educators and many adults.

The Myth of a "Safe" Adolescence

Ironically, the attempt to achieve a protected childhood is a relatively recent development. It wasn't too long ago that children took an active part in the adult world from a very young age. Before the onset of the construct of "adolescence," even into the late 1800s, "the young were often left to fend for themselves. There was very little schooling, endemic child labor, and puberty marked the moment when the fight for survival began in earnest" (Savage, 2007, p. 10). Children were put to work early not only in so-called legitimate work as factory work and agriculture but also in more questionable lines of work such as show business and even criminal pursuits such as theft and prostitution (Lahr, 1969/2000; Mintz, 2004).

The very first Puritan settlers of North America in the 1600s felt that childhood was at best a time to prepare children for death by making sure they had salvation; "children were adults in training who needed to be prepared for salvation and inducted into the world of work as early as possible" (Mintz, 2004, p. 10). Children were even shown corpses and executions so that they would have a heightened sensitivity to the reality of their own mortality; the Puritan childhood was so brutal that some children who were abducted by Native Americans preferred to stay with their captors once they were rescued (Mintz, 2004).

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