Tweet This: Helping Students Transfer their Digital Media Skills to Complex Reading Tasks

Jennifer Beach
Fairfax County Public Schools in Virginia

Stacia Keel
Fairfax County Public Schools in Virginia

Jennifer Beach and Stacia Keel

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They are the "digital natives": They're the smart-phones-permanently-attached-to-their-thumbs generation; they're masters of social media: tweeting, texting, and updating their statuses on a minute-by-minute basis.

We are the English teachers, asking them to read about characters from long ago, asking them to analyze and think, rather than just "like" or "comment" on things.

As a literacy specialist (Stacia), and as a literacy teacher (Jenn), one issue that has confronted us recently is how to engage these students—these "digital natives"—and how to help them build their reading, writing, and analysis skills. We have experience using technology in our classrooms; we know that the high school English classroom is very different from when we both began teaching. We didn't have class websites or online grading programs back then. Our students didn't email us at midnight for clarification on the reading assignment due the next day. We didn't have to deal with requests from students to be their "friend" on Facebook.

While embracing instructional technology to enhance our teaching, we realized that we were just using new tools to teach the same skills. Technology served as a "gimmick," rather than a tool to help students gain a true metacognitive awareness of how their social media skills can be applied to their academic work.

We sat down to brainstorm how we could help students make connections between the skills they use in their everyday digital world and the skills they need to succeed on their English reading assignments. Students still read books, as evidenced by the students, both male and female, carrying around *Twilight* and *The Hunger Games* and making comparisons between the films and texts, but our observations of students texting, discussing Facebook status updates and Twitter tweets, and using phones to find information on Google in mere seconds helped us see that there is a real need for English teachers to understand and embrace the tools of the "digital native."

The first thing we needed to do was decide which types of social media to focus on. To do this, we needed to understand what exactly the students were doing online. Should we focus on Facebook? Twitter? YouTube? Google searches? Wikipedia? Texting? Should we consider texting a type of "digital media"? What about Tumblr? Pinterest? Is there a website that students use that we adults don't even know about?

Realizing we didn't know enough about the digital lives of our own students to know what to focus on in our planning, we designed a simple paper survey asking about internet and social media usage that we could give to Jenn's classes. And yes, we see the irony in a survey for the teenage digital native that is on paper. Many of the students pointed this irony out to us, a teachable moment about the concept of irony. We were already connecting digital skills and reading analysis skills, and we hadn't even started planning our lessons yet!

Our survey opened our eyes and humbled us. Teenagers and their forty-something English teachers might both be using social media, but there are distinct differences in our uses. We were fascinated when a student commented that Pintrest is "for moms to look at recipes and crafts" and shocked to find out that Twitter is "so easy to hack" and used for bullying other students. We were surprised that students didn't show much knowledge of web resources that could help them academically, such as Reddit or Google Scholar, and amazed that they saw Instagram as something similar to Tumblr, while we think of it as a cute way to share retro-looking photos of kids and pets.

We were also surprised that social media usage differed greatly among our students based on cultural background, school success, and personal taste. Our students were open, analytical, and interested in discussing how they use social

media and what skills they have already honed. A quick survey turned into spirited discussions with the roles of teacher and student often reversed.

Our survey helped us focus on three modes of digital media that all of the students in Jenn's classes were very familiar with: Facebook, Twitter, and texting. Feeling certain that these three areas would have great potential for crossover with reading skills, our next task was to examine these social media forms and isolate the skills students use daily as they interact online. We then selected skills that seemed most ripe for connections with reading lessons. We developed a chart for each media type to help us brainstorm skills and make connections (see tables 1, 2, and 3).

Facebook

We spent the most time developing ways to incorporate Facebook into different lessons because it is the social media form through which the students interact most. Whether or not they post on Facebook, students reported that they check their newsfeeds frequently throughout the day.

Table 1-Connecting Facebook skills and reading skills

Facebook Skill	Literature Analysis/Reading Skill
Identifying the tone of the writer	Identifying the tone of the narrator
Understanding sarcasm, irony, understatement and parody	Understanding sarcasm, irony, understatement and parody
Identifying characteristics of the writer's voice	Identifying characteristics of the writer's voice
Importance of specific word choice	Impact of specific word choice
Importance of allusions to the poster's point	Importance of allusions
Audience for the writer	Audience for the novel
Symbolism in the post	Symbolism in a piece of literature
Recognizing point of view and bias in the post	Recognizing point of view and bias of a writer
Examining credibility of the poster	Examining credibility of a writer or character
Making predictions about future statue updates, pages liked, types of memes posted	Making predictions about plot, character motivations, themes, etc.
Understanding universal characters, roles of people	Understanding universal characters
Making judgments based on stereotypes and prejudices	Identifying the stereotypes held by characters, prejudices in the writing
Importance of the word and visual images as seen in memes, Facebook pages liked, and photographs and captions	Importance of the word and the visual images as seen in functional texts, graphic novels, and media images

Examining the Status Update for Characterization

In the past, Stacia has had students examine the character Daisy in *The Great Gatsby* by specifically focusing on passages featuring her voice—what she says, how Nick describes her saying it, and how Gatsby describes Daisy's voice. To prepare the students for this lesson, Stacia added a new component involving social media: having students first analyze and discuss the four status updates from one of Stacia's Facebook friends (used with the author's permission and name removed) in the following:

• Jesus has saved me and it would take years to count all the ways God has blessed me on top of that! I am thankful for my salvation and for the 38 years God has given me.

• Just feeling really worn out from my activities of today. Don't know why this reminded me of a favorite movie of mine, but I'm hearing the six-fingered man's voice in my head right now, "I've just sucked one year of your life away." :)

- Sometimes being a mom means protecting your children from harm.....like fishing all the peanut-containing candy from the bucket of your peanut intolerant child so that she doesn't accidentally eat it. And just to be extra safe, dispose of it by eating it.

- Heard my 9 year old telling the 7 year old how great it will be when they grow up and get their own place because they can do whatever they want and never do chores again. So I turned on an episode of "Hoarders" and showed them what a house looks like when chores are never done. "Ok, Mom. I will do chores! I promise!"

The skills students use in discussing the characteristics of Stacia's friend are the same skills they use when, coupled with analyzing what Daisy says and the way that she says it, examining the following excerpt from *The Great Gatsby*:

"'Her voice is full of money,' he said suddenly.
That was it. I'd never understood before. It was full of money—that was the inexhaustible charm that rose and fell in it, the cymbals' song of it…"(Fitzgerald 120).

By first examining the status updates from Stacia's friend, the students debate the importance of the allusion to *The Princess Bride* and the television show *Hoarders*. They look at how she creates humor in her posts, discuss what kind of a mother they think she is and why, and even look at her sentence structure. They make predictions, based on these posts, about what kind of posts she might make in the future. Just as all of these skills are used when examining a character in a piece of literature, they're also used when reading Facebook posts. Thus, reading these posts may make it easier for students to transfer their analysis skills to their academic reading of characterization.

Using the Status Update to Practice Second Person and Apostrophe

To help students in Jenn's remedial reading class master point-of-view, we planned a lesson using sample status updates written in second person. We had noticed many of our hipper, young "friends" on Facebook posting things like, "Hello Friday! I can't wait to see you!" We decided that this skill could help students practice figuring out point of view when reading a text (a necessary skill on our Virginia state reading test), while also serving as a way to help students review books they were being assessed on in English class. We shared the following status update with the students (used with the permission of the author):

Hello Nap,
We were so close this summer but I haven't seen you for a while. I'm really glad we're getting back together this weekend. I've missed you. You have always been one of my favorites to hang out with.Love,Katie

We had students determine what point of view this was written in (following a review of point of view a few classes prior to this); then, we asked the students to log onto their Facebook pages to examine their friends' status updates (or their own) to find first-person and third-person point-of-view examples to share with the class. The students were very engaged in sharing and analyzing Facebook status updates, but it quickly became clear that we should have set ground rules first, such as prohibiting the students from sharing other people's names in order to preserve their privacy, as well as reading inappropriate things for school aloud.

The next stage of the lesson asked students to use the second person status update as a mentor text for writing their own mock updates. This activity helped them prepare for a diagnostic writing on their summer reading selections by asking them to address an inanimate object or even idea found in the book, from the point of view of the author or a character.

Even the weakest students engaged in this activity with excitement. They all grasped the tongue-in-cheek use of second person to write to an inanimate object and took the assignment farther than we expected by choosing objects from their books that had symbolic or thematic value. We shared them aloud in class and one student commented, before Jenn could make the point, that their choices of objects were "really

analytical." This was the metacognitive "a-ha" moment we had been hoping for: students were seeing that their skills and knowledge from social media could make them stronger English students! Here is an example of the complexity a student was able to show in his analysis of his chosen text, Ishmael Beah's *A Long Way Gone* (the student's punctuation remains intact):

Dear AK-47-
I love you but I hate you. I wish I never met you. You made me feel safe but also made me who I am now a killer. Ishmael

After this lesson, the students were much more comfortable with second person, easily identifying it in writing, both in their own and in mentor texts. They asked to use the status update model again to review *To Kill a Mockingbird*; together, we decided to have different characters in the novel write to "racism" as a concept to show their views on it. This assignment wasn't long or fancy, but students clearly saw the connection between their skill with reading, writing, and analyzing status updates and the skills they are asked to use in English class. Thus, it made an excellent introduction to our class focus on connecting social media skills with reading skills.

Twitter

Discussing our survey questions with our students, we were surprised to learn that Twitter is starting to take the place of Facebook for many students. As the students talked about why they like Twitter, we realized that it had great potential for building reading skills.

Table 2-Connecting Twitter skills and reading skills

Twitter Skills	Literature Analysis/Reading Skill
Understanding Voice	Understanding voice
Identifying Tone	Identifying tone
Identifying common themes in a series of Tweets	Identifying themes commonly explored by an author; identifying theme throughout a piece of literature
Identifying the main idea of the Tweet	Identifying the main idea of a piece of writing
Making Inferences about the author's intent in a Tweet	Making inferences about the author's intent in a text
Identifying the Point of View and Bias in the Tweet	Identifying the Point of View and Bias of an author
Understanding the methods of persuasion employed in a Tweet	Understanding the methods of persuasion employed in an argument
Communicating in a concise manner	Understanding the importance of word choice in communication

Live Tweeting to Practice Tovani's "Inner Voice" and Annotation

In Jenn's remedial literacy class, the students were preparing for an annotation unit, in which they would annotate an entire text (*Lord of the Flies*) as they read. To help students understand how to annotate a literary work, especially one that she knew they would find challenging, Jenn began by introducing the concept of the reader's "inner voice" via worksheets modeled on Tovani's own inner voice (50). Jenn modeled a think-aloud to help students understand the idea of hearing their inner voice while reading, using high interest articles from Scholastic's *UpFront Magazine,* and then had students practice using an inner voice chart while reading another article.

An assessment of students' completed "inner voice" sheets showed that they were attempting to summarize sections of the article, rather than truly revealing their own thoughts, ideas, and questions about the reading, which was the grade level team's goal with the annotation book assignment. The students' difficulty with annotation and "inner voice" presented a chance to help the students relate a more challenging English skill to a digital skill they use frequently by connecting annotation to tweeting.

First, Jenn started class by asking the students to do a quick-write, in which they answered the question: Why do people tweet? An informative discussion began as students shared their quick-writes. Jenn next led the class in generating a list of types of tweets. Here is the students' list:

- Give your opinion (to get feedback)
- Share news/Information
- Re-tweet to share something interesting
- Show your interests and personal style
- Bully/Make fun of people
- Call people out
- Have a tweet battle (showing off your verbal insult-creating skills)
- Ask a question

Next, to help students make connections between the thinking patterns of tweeting and annotating a text, Jenn found examples of "live tweeting" of events that would appeal to students. She took screenshots, to recreate the chain of tweets, and put them on PowerPoint slides.

Jenn was able to find engaging examples of tweets that popped up on Twitter while her school's dance team was competing on national television. To further engage students, she also used a series of live tweets during a Redskins game—we are in Northern Virginia and root for DC!—in which our region's beloved new quarterback, Robert Griffin III, suffered a frightening knee injury. She showed short video clips of the two events while reading aloud the tweets that were being generated during the events. These two examples helped students see how tweeting while watching an event is like annotating; you share your opinions, ideas, connections, jokes, and questions as the "story" of the event unfolds, making your thinking visible.

Jenn gave students the chance to practice transferring their twitter skills to a literary work by first having them "live tweet" a scene from the movie version of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, which they had just read. Because Jenn's school system has regulations that prohibit her from actually having students tweet as a class activity, she created a mock version using the chat function in Blackboard Collaborate. Students simultaneously watched the video clip while posting their "mock tweets" in real time on the shared chat space. After the scene, the class went back and looked at their comments. Jenn asked them to do a quick-write in which they attempted to describe how tweeting while watching the video clip helped them process it better.

Finally, it was time for students to practice their tweeting skills with a literary passage. To scaffold the students, Jenn created an inner voice sheet that showed the text of a passage from *Of Mice and Men* on one side, with inner voice boxes next to each paragraph. Because the students had already read *Of Mice and Men*, they were knowledgeable about the characters and the plot and could focus on practicing their annotation/tweeting skills with a familiar reading. After reading and annotating the passage, students shared their comments and questions with the class and discussed the similarities between annotating the passage and live tweeting an event or scene in a movie. One student summed up their learning beautifully by stating that tweets are the inner voice that you show the public and your inner voice is what you write down when you annotate.

The next stage was to help students carry their new skill to *Lord of the Flies*. Jenn set up their practice by putting the first few paragraphs of chapter one onto a handout, with boxes next to each paragraph for students' annotations. Students were able to use their inner voice sheets in a discussion of chapter one. At this point, students were ready to annotate on their own in the margins of the novel, using the concept of tweeting to help them focus on their inner voice as they read.

Texting

Texting is one mode of communication that has changed phone plans for families across America. We all know that our students text frequently and with ease. Of course, texting is appropriate for study in both student's writing and reading, but we decided to focus on reading skills

Table 3-Connecting texting skills and reading skills

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Texting Skills	Literature Analysis/Reading Skills
Understanding the importance of word choice	Understanding the importance of word choice
Precision in word choice and syntax	Analyzing how syntax and word choice work together
Editing Skills	Understanding how attention to detail in editing affects a message
Understanding sentence variety	Understanding how sentence variety/syntax affect the tone, message, and audience
Importance of identifying main details	Identifying main details in a message
Interpreting the tone of a text message	Analyzing how the word choice and syntax create the tone
Interpreting the connotation of words and the hash tags in a text message	Understanding the nuances in connotation of a words in a text
Shorthand/note taking	Using shorthand/note taking to help one's self summarize and make sense of a piece of literature

Texting and tone

Texting provided a quick entry into thinking about tone and evidence for Jenn's AP Literature students. First, students were asked to take out their own phones and examine some of their past text conversations to see if they noticed anything about their own texting "voices." They were asked to look for tone, sentence patterns and word choice they use frequently, and other aspects of their own voices and the voices of their texting partners. They all found that they frequently use emoticons to get across tone rather than word choice.

The class discussed why emoticons are easy shorthand to use in the brief form of the text message. Take this exchange of text messages Jenn shared with her students (see fig. 1). She sent the same text on three separate occasions to her husband; he responded in three different ways:

Figure 1: Text and three responses
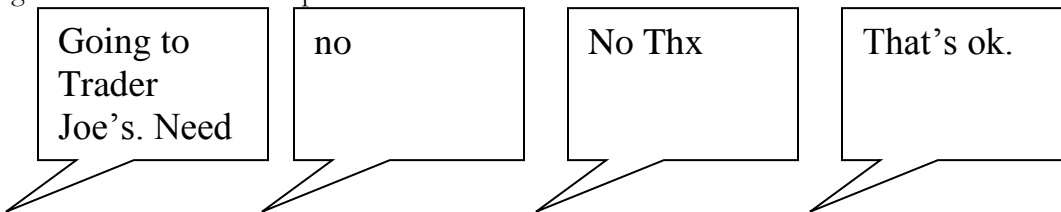
Students quickly identify the third text as the one they would most want to receive and found it easy to discuss the tone of each of the messages, responding to questions like: Why didn't he include any emoticons? What are the slight differences in his tone in each one? Is it possible he didn't get across the tone he wanted to in the first one?

Examining the relationship between word choice and tone in these texts made it easier for students to examine the relationship between word choice and tone in literature. Students often try to read between the lines a little *too* much when analyzing literature, making an analysis of emotional reason they wish to be true rather than the evidence in the plot they see on the page. Examining this series of texts helped students focus on evidence rather than the back story they created as to why the first text has a harsher tone than the third: "Maybe he was just having a bad day." "Maybe he was just in a hurry and wanted to send a reply and didn't want to ignore her." "Maybe he got cut off and had to answer the phone at work and only had time to type 'no.'"

Jenn's AP Literature students practiced transferring their analysis of evidence to find tone by looking at a passage from *Crime and Punishment*: Luzhin's letter to Pulcheria in Part 3, a passage dripping with a condescending, pretentious, self-important tone. They identified the tone of the passage, circling words and

phrases that they believed revealed the tone. Finally, students played with humor and irony by adding emoticons to a typed version of the passage that completely changed the tone.

Reflection

Our survey taught us that students use social media differently than adults do, and that they are skilled at analyzing and explaining the thought processes that occur when they use social media. By building on their expertise with social media skills, we were able to help them think metacognitively about how they use similar skills when reading and analyzing complicated tasks. The lessons we developed to help the students make connections and transfer their skills were popular in the classroom; even struggling readers felt confident about the social media portions of the lessons, and this confidence helped them take risks as they tackled the reading practice in each lesson.

One delightful result of our semester of focusing on how social media skills connect to reading skills was that our students took ownership of making the connections, often suggesting that "live tweeting" a chapter we are reading would help them deal with their confusion, or making other suggestions for how a reading skill we are practicing in class is similar to a social media skill. Allowing our students to teach us about social media through the survey and discussion helped this series of lessons become more than a set of gimmicky class activities; instead, the students became active participants in creating their own metacognitive awareness of how they use reading and analysis skills daily in their personal, digital lives and how these are the same skills they can call on to be successful readers.

As we reflect on this experience using social media skills to connect reading skills, we leave with some positive and negative take-aways for future lessons.

- **The downside: negative ways social media influences our students in class:**
  ◦ Students are less skilled in intently focusing on one thing.
  ◦ Students often rely on emoticons and abbreviations to show tone, so they need more practice creating tone in their own writing and identifying it in the writing of others.
  ◦ Students are less likely to take time for slow reflection when social media asks for a quick response.

- **On the upside: positive ways social media helps our students in class:**
  ◦ Students think on more than one level at a time.
  ◦ Students form and share rapidly in response to media.
  ◦ Students make their thoughts visible (maybe not to us…).
  ◦ Students can interpret sarcasm, satire, and verbal humor.

We are only at the beginning stages of using social media skills to enhance learning in the English classroom. Using social media does not have to be viewed as just a cutesy gimmick. Directly involving students in their own learning by engaging them in conversations about how they use social media helps students build metacognitive awareness of their own thought processes and the ways their own skills and strengths can translate to classroom success.

Jennifer Beach is a National Board Certified Teacher who has been with Fairfax County Public Schools in Virginia for 17 years, after four years as a parochial school teacher. She is the English Department Chair at West Springfield High School, where she teaches AP Literature and Expanding Literacies, a literacy support course for at-risk students.

Stacia Keel is a National Board Certified Teacher who has been with Fairfax County Public Schools in Virginia for 15 years. She taught in the IB and IBMY programs at Mount Vernon High School and served as English department chair. Currently she is a resource teacher working with teachers of Developing Literacies and Expanding Literacies, literacy support courses for at-risk students.