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Literary Instagram: Shakespearean Imagery in Social Media

Over the course of the past few years, I have tried to figure out a way to make use of social media in my high school English courses. My previous efforts have included projects that have required students to create wiki pages and mock-Facebook pages for characters and character texting dialogues. My latest effort in attempting to incorporate social media into my class instruction was when I asked students to create a mock-Instagram feed that would re-tell the story of William Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*.

The project was intended as a summary assignment, after we had completed multiple weeks of class work on the play. Our previous class work had consisted of a series of readings with focus questions, translations of isolated passages, formative assessments to check for understanding and comprehension, and watching a film version of the play for reinforcement. My summative assessment for the class was to be a character study essay, but the holiday break had come upon us too soon for me squeeze in the writing assignment before the break. I needed a bridge assignment that would serve as a refresher for the students when they returned. The solution was to have the students create a literary Instagram for the play.

For those who may be unfamiliar with Instagram, the concept is fairly simple: the user posts a picture, which serves a visual equivalent of a Facebook status post, or a tweet. The user also has the option to add a short comment related to the picture that has posted. Users can follow others on Instagram, and any new posts of a user that you follow will be added to your news feed. As a user, you can add a short comment to anyone else's posted picture. My idea for converting this into a literary assignment was to have students imagine that the characters of the play were all Instagram users, and that they were posting images and comments as major events of the story were happening.

In order to foster collaboration amongst students, the class was broken up into heterogeneous groups. The groups consisted of

four or five students per group. Each student was to be responsible for creating the Instagram feed for an act of the play. (This could easily be adjusted to require each student to take the role of a specific character and respond throughout the news feed where appropriate.) The students were given a list of major characters that were required to make posts within the project. For each posted image, the students were required to provide a user name for the character who made the post; that character had to include a comment for his or her own post, and then other characters had to comment on the post as well. The students were informed that they would be assessed on their ability to use the project to communicate the significant plot points of the play, as well as to communicate their understanding of the personalities of characters within the play.

The class work for the project took a couple of days. First, the groups were asked to develop a plot outline of the story and brainstorm possible posts and comments without the availability of computers. The students began thinking of the screen names that the characters would have, converting the opinions of the characters into text-talk, and then connecting the brainstormed images to relevant hash tags (ie. when Brutus compares Caesar to a serpent and concludes that it would be easiest to kill him in the shell before he is hatched, a student created a post that was a picture of snake eggs and then he comments: "Thinking of Ceasar. #antiking #killtheserpent #best4rome). Once the basic idea of the project was mapped out, the students were able to use computers in class to find relevant images and to type out their comments. The more artistically-inclined students chose to draw their own images, while the more tech-savvy students were able to create a computerized template that mimicked the Instagram setup. The last step of the class work was to have the students put together their news feeds in the order in which the events appeared in the text. These physical news feeds were pasted to blank backing paper to create the scroll.

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I encouraged students to find pictures that focused on the imagery of the text, or images that had a more symbolic connection to the text, rather than presenting a series of still images from the film, paintings of the historical characters, or sculptures of the historical characters. My thought behind this was that I wanted the students to pay attention to the imagery used by Shakespeare. By this point in our study we had read the text as a class, watched the film, created outlines of the plot, and ultimately developed a basic understanding of the story. The project was intended to have the students internalize and interpret Shakespeare's writing, and help them understand how his use of imagery helps to develop both character and plot. This is an aspect of the project where a teacher can assess the cognitive ability of his students, and it is also an area of the assignment that can be adjusted to the ability level of the students in the class. Teachers with a class of struggling students may be more flexible in allowing literal imagery on the project,

while teachers with more intellectually-advanced students may decide to require their students to focus more on abstract or symbolic imagery and the function said imagery plays in story telling.

To conclude the assignment, the students were asked to present their Instagram feeds to the class. I knew the basic information of each presentation would be similar, but I thought that they might enjoy showing off the bells and whistles of their respective group projects. The students had the most fun sharing their invented user names and hash tags with each other. I enjoyed watching the groups develop the project, debate which events needed to be on their plot outlines, brainstorm the types of comments that characters would make on a post, and, best of all, delve into the original text to find imagery that would be useful for the project. Overall, it was a great way to come back from a holiday break, and academically, it served as a nice primer for the essay that was to follow.



Gregory Vacca teaches English at Summit High School. He recently completed his doctoral work in the field of Educational Leadership at The College of Saint Elizabeth.