Book Review

The Socially Networked Classroom: Teaching in the New Media Age
William Kist
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Recently, there has been recognition that young people are able to engage in media in a variety of ways, such as through fanfiction (Black, 2007), slam poetry (Jocson, 2009), digital stories (Hull & Nelson, 2005; Nelson, Hull, & Roche-Smith, 2008), and youth-produced videos (Burn & Parker, 2003). But there have been only a few texts that discuss the pedagogy behind such innovative work in these new literacies in school settings (Burn & Durran, 2007; Hobbs, 2006, Morrell, 2004). In The Socially Networked Classroom, William Kist is showing educators different ways to teach one of these new media—social networks—through an easy-to-follow set of lesson plans, questions, and personal experiences that can help any educator begin the process of teaching these new media in his or her own classroom.

In his past work, William Kist discusses five characteristics of new literacies classrooms: utilizing multiple forms of representations; explicitly discussing symbol systems; teachers modeling media literacy through think-aloud lessons; students working individually and collaboratively on activities; and students achieving a "flow" state through increased student engagement (Kist, 2000). In The Socially Networked Classroom, Kist expands this work to show teachers how to enact media literacy lessons in their classrooms. Through focusing on pioneering teachers' successes and struggles in teaching media literacy in schools, Kist provides both strong theoretical rationales and detailed media lessons for teachers of all grade levels and from all subject areas.

In the Introduction (Chapter 1) Kist outlines the rationale behind the book as well as its structure. The organization of Kist's book is straightforward and useful. Cleverly based on Starbucks terms for coffee sizes, Kist sequences the book through increasing complexity of media lessons depending on how much access to technology his readers have in their schools. He begins with "Short," "the most basic nonwired situation" (p. 7), then moves to "Tall," a classroom with moderate levels of technology access. The next two levels are classrooms with high-tech environments—"Grande" and "Venti"—with "Venti" being the most technologically advanced classroom. Organized through a series of guiding questions specific to each chapter, these different access points allow teachers to find their own schools' situations on the continuum to identify the activities that are appropriate for their own classrooms.

Throughout the book, as well, Kist discusses concerns facing teachers in terms of standardization, which helps teachers to bridge the world of meeting standards with the new demands of increasing media literacy. Moreover, Kist weaves in the voices of pioneering teachers profiled in the book by placing their own words throughout the text in the form of "blog entries" to the readers.

Kist begins the "Short" chapter (Chapter 2) by telling how even he had faltered at first when it came to being a new literacies teacher when he went back to teaching after doing his
new literacies research. His describes this: "Not only did I need to 'walk the walk,' I needed to pick up the pace" (p. 12). And pick up the pace, he does, as he gives the readers lesson activity after lesson activity in this chapter. But what seems like disconnected activities are actually a series of rationales, lesson activities, and questions that can lead a class from its initial work with basic media concepts to a more complicated understanding of how media literacy operates on a social level—all without using a computer at all. All of the lessons in this chapter are lessons he used with and taught his preservice teachers at Kent State University. Also, it is important to point out that Kist uses lessons that we are already familiar with as English teachers, such as literacy autobiographies or multi-genre research projects, and he adds a media component to them. This is a good beginning for any teacher not accustomed to using media in her teaching because it forms a good bridge between the old and the new.

The "Tall" chapter (Chapter 3) is a chapter highlighting teachers who have begun to use some social networking in the classroom. Kist begins by addressing how the overwhelming concern over using the Internet in classrooms is Internet safety, and he discusses Internet safety curricula and/or simulated Internet environments both in schools and in online educational sites, such as Zoey’s Room, an online afterschool club for girls to interest them in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) fields (pp. 49-50). Kist also addresses the concern that many teachers have about using the Internet in the classroom, which is the fear that students will plagiarize. In response, Kist discusses how the idea of "fair use" has shifted from sole proprietary ownership of ideas and content to a more open form of attribution, such as Creative Commons Licensing (p. 50) and how there are now studies and policy statements about fair use in the classroom, in particular the work of the Media Education Lab at Temple University headed by Renee Hobbs (p. 51).

Then, Kist includes a variety of lesson activities and questions, in this chapter, primarily about using blogging in the classroom, and nearly all of the lessons are from practicing teachers who use these lessons in their classrooms. As a first step, he suggests blogging through an intranet system, which is an online system that is "completely protected and cut off from the real Internet" (p. 54) but that still offers similar affordances to the Internet. Some examples of an Intranet are Moodle, Turnitin.com (for a list of protected sites for hosting blogs, see p. 55). The rest of this chapter includes lesson activities and experiences from pioneer teachers who have begun to use blogging and creating wikis in their classrooms using such Intranet sites. As with Chapter 2, Kist expands on already existing and successful literacy pedagogy in this chapter by discussing how he and others transitioned Literature Circles into blogs and wikis (pp. 62-65). Kist ends this chapter with assignment prompts for electronic versions of Writing and Reading Portfolios. This chapter is useful because "by carefully testing the waters in a protected space, teachers can provide the element of social networking they want for their students while getting a chance to practice online etiquette, format, and expression" (p. 68).

The third chapter, "Grande," discusses how social networking could work in classrooms that are "high-tech." In this chapter, Kist provides lessons from teachers who are familiar with Web 2.0 and who teach it to their students in effective ways. One of the key features of media literacy in the United States is that there is no coherent set of curricula in place (Hobbs, 2004, p. 43), so it often feels fragmented with each teacher doing his or her own media literacy lessons with few connections to other teachers. Although this is getting better, and Kist’s book is an attempt to make this better, this chapter only brings this point to bear in that it is more a collection of teachers’ experiences and lessons rather than a cohesive set of lessons. That said, it is rich with examples and lessons from teachers all over the U.S. (and one from New Zealand), and it provides inspiration for other teachers. The "Grande" chapter begins by advocating that in order to teach Web 2.0, teachers must teach themselves first. By dipping one’s feet into blogs and Nings oneself, teachers can "pick up the knack of navigating this new landscape themselves" (p. 72). The rest of the chapter is a listing of lesson ideas, prompts, and questions that teachers who have extensive experience teaching with technology have used in their classrooms. The first few lessons are about blogging, and how to teach students to be savvy readers and commentators on blogs. What
followers are lesson activities about students building relationships online with students who do not live in their own communities. What binds these different experiences together is that they are all done by teachers motivated by Web 2.0 themselves and who teach in schools that have relatively few filters in place, such as allowing students access to Google and other sites. This does not mean, however, that these teachers do not put in safeguards for students; they certainly do. But, they are allowed a certain level of freedom, which they can pass along to their students. A big part of these lessons, however, is teaching students how to use this freedom wisely "...with all of the logistical, legal, and ethical dilemmas that those increasing freedoms bring" (p. 94).

The "Venti" chapter (Chapter 5) focuses on environments that are largely "off-campus" settings in which there is unlimited access to online environments. What Kist asserts is that given the restrictions often found in schools, it is usually the non-school settings that have the most access to new media and that can teach these tools with greater freedoms. In my work with non-profit youth media arts organizations, I have certainly found this to be true (Halverson & Gibbons, 2010), but by highlighting the teaching in these spaces, Kist suggests that they can be an inspiration for what can occur in school settings. Kist does showcase an interesting school setting, however, when he discusses a high school in Minneapolis that is piloting "hybrid" courses, classes in which students spend part of their time face-to-face and part of their time online in small groups. This course is taught similarly to the others in the book, in particular assigning blogs, wikis, and Nings alongside traditional writing assignments, but it is a special case because during a significant part of the instruction time, the students are not in the classroom proper but rather are online (for example, for a good model rubric for student self-evaluation of posts to a Ning, see pp. 104-105). The rest of the chapter highlights teaching that is occurring outside of schools in after-school programs, such as computer gaming clubs (pp. 109-110) or LGBTQ youth community programs (p. 111). What ties these examples together is that they are all using social media in ways that are educational even if the settings themselves are not seen as such.

In the epilogue, cleverly entitled "Refill," Kist addresses some macro-level concerns teachers have about introducing lessons on social networking in schools, such as how much freedom children ought to have in schools and how much “entertainment” should or should not be a part of “education.” Kist also addresses a common concern for teachers, which is that they feel they do not have enough time to teach the technological components behind social media. Kist has two suggestions for this: 1) spending minimal whole class time teaching the technology and relying on students to teach one another as needed and/or 2) building choice into assignments so that students who are comfortable with the technology may use it while those who are not may opt for other options (pp. 120-121). Kist ends with the larger question of what our schools should aspire to be. He finds hope in the pioneering teachers spotlighted in his book (p. 122), all of whom are doing inspiring work with new media.

This book is so jam-packed with lessons that, at times, honestly, it feels a bit overwhelming. But, overall, that richness is also this book’s greatest strength. Kist’s Socially Networked Classroom lives up to its promise that it will be accessible and informative to teachers at all levels. It could be a great primer for a teacher new to these ideas as well as a resource for those with more experience. Also, the focus on one type of media literacy with this much depth and consideration is a credit to the field, and hopefully, there will be many more books on other media like it in our future.

References

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