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When Learning Goes Viral: Exploring Social Media Affordances in the Professional Writing Classroom

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Abstract

Since professional writing classes need to prepare students to succeed in their future professional roles, it becomes imperative that they expose students to the participatory culture that characterizes the digital workplace. In order for instructors to take advantage of social media technology (SMT) opportunities to educate students on how they could negotiate through and write in public digital spaces, instructors may need to introduce changes in how they currently practice professional writing instruction. This article forwards new scaffolds and approaches to learning and assessment necessitated by the integration of SMTs into the professional writing curriculum. Using the theory of affordances as an underpinning, this article suggests ways to create and grade SMT tasks that provide students opportunities to write on social media platforms. While participation is presented as the paradigm for learning in the SMT enhanced professional writing classroom, the paper discusses how co-creation can be used as the preferred scaffold for assignment creation and evaluation. In closing, the article offers some tested assignment suggestions and rubrics.

Keywords: Professional Writing, Social Media Technologies, Affordances.

Community participation and social media sharing are norms rather than exceptions today. Why and how does this affect writing professors and writing classes? Should we, as professional writing instructors, take academic advantage of the content creation opportunities that social media technologies give rise to, or should we view them as time usurping, small-talk spaces from which students need to be protected? Put differently, should professional writing instructors view Facebook and Twitter as “friending” and “following” sites or treat them as tools that can be used to achieve learning goals.

Perhaps a choice does not exist since social media technologies (or SMTs) are here to stay. In the context of generational attitudes to SMT, Turnbull (2020) points out how “Generation Z prefers to consume information electronically, combining it with their online social activities. They are also empowered by the opportunity to create their own content” (p. 3). Though 88% of individuals of ages 18-29 are using at least one social media site in 2017 (Pew Internet Research report, 2018), this does not imply that these users are adept at using SMT to represent who they are online. Given this background, it is imperative that professional writing instructors teach students how to use social media for professional purposes. With most institutions and companies using social media outfits to expand their networks, further their

objectives, and reap higher revenues, new career options for technical and business writing graduates are opening up in digital writing, content management, and public relations marketing in social media spaces. Hence, professional writing teachers need to take up the responsibility to teach social media writing skills to students. If students receive opportunities to hone their content creation skills through carefully calibrated activities in college, they will be in a better position to represent the companies they will work for later. In this article, I, therefore, explore the concept of affordance and how it could aid instructors in using SMT tools in class activities in professional writing courses.

Affordance is the property or quality of an object that determines how an object can be used. Affordances exist for all objects and can be direct or indirect. A direct affordance for a stone, for instance, is that it exists as a piece of rock; however, a user could utilize it as a tool for attack, a paper weight, or a decorative item. Similarly, instructors must be able to perceive and activate the educational affordances of each social media platform before they can use the SMT efficiently as an educational instrument. In the ensuing sections, I move on to expand on the theory of SMT affordances and share sample social media assignments that have been successfully used at educational institutions. I offer two possible scaffolds for using SMTs for instructional purposes before reviewing challenges limiting their use in class and suggesting how these obstacles could be overcome.

What Is the Theory of Affordances?

The concept of affordance, as educational psychologist James Gibson (1979) first defined it, was the refusal to classify an object:

The theory of affordances rescues us from the philosophical muddle of assuming fixed classes of objects, each defined by its common features and then given a name...You do not have to classify and label things in order to perceive what they afford. (p. 126)

Bucher and Hammond (2017) spotlighted how applying the concept of affordance on SMT spaces requires an analytical projection of the work it is expected to do (p. 30). The projected use lies inherent in the medium and may not be evident to all. As per Andersson et al. (2021), “Affordances exist as a relationship between an actor and an artifact... Affordances are the possible actions of the artifact that set the preconditions for an activity but do not stipulate the occurrence of a specific activity” (p. 2997). What this means is that the activity has to be conducted in a particular way within an SMT artifact to unbridle the potential of the platform used.

An affordance, or possible use, lies latent until the user perceives and releases it. When an object, technology, or idea is used differently from what it was primarily envisaged for, a new affordance is realized for it. When a company observes the marketing potential of a social media space, it could decide to use its promotional affordance to generate capital and revenue. Similarly, when a public health organization spots the reach of a social media outfit, the organization could plan to use the SMT’s sway to spread awareness. Even if it has been

classified as a friending social media site or a video sharing site or a site to develop professional contacts, SMTs such as Facebook, YouTube, or LinkedIn can have academic use or educational affordances for developing real-world content creation skills. Since educational affordances are not simply “built into” the SMT technologies—it is in the very nature of affordances that they must be perceived, taken up, and activated—the mere use of Facebook or YouTube or LinkedIn, for instance, does not guarantee benefit from the SMTs’ educational affordance. Rather the learning activity has to be so designed that the students can successfully interact together in knowledge-building communities created on Facebook to produce co-constructed artifacts such as a YouTube video that could be posted on LinkedIn. Though social media spaces present opportunities for collaboration, shared content creation, and participation in knowledge building, these possibilities can only be actualized when the educational affordances of SMTs are understood and integrated effectively into learning environments.

Writing Affordances of Social Media Technology (SMT): A Review

SMT spaces, as we know them today, came into existence with the launch of Wikipedia in 2001 and Facebook in 2004. SMT itself was an acronym coined to describe all the technology-enabled information sharing spaces that led to the building of online collaborative communities where content may be small as in Twitter, or large as in blogs and wikis, in audio form as in podcasts, or in video form as in YouTube or vlogs. As accessibility and reach of SMT spaces increased, the educational affordances of the platforms became increasingly apparent. Even if the literature on the educational affordance of social media over the last ten years is limited, scholars did indicate that SMT spaces could offer avenues for teaching writing. For instance, Leppisaari et al. (2014) reasoned that SMT assignments could prove helpful if they incorporated written “reflection” components, where reflection was both a “process” and a “product” of the designed activity (p. 226). Piotrowski (2015) went a step further when he suggested that integrating SMTs into professional writing instruction fostered student engagement, improved academic performance, and promoted interactions between faculty and students (p. 10). Hussain et al. (2018) spotlighted how innovative writing activities designed around social media activate a desire for deeper learning that increases motivation among undergraduate students (p. 293). In short, there is agreement amongst scholars that as long as instructors build a sound rationale for designing writing activities using SMT spaces, the activities could yield rich dividends in terms of improved writing skills. The challenge, however, is that it has to be pedagogically designed such that the writing projects were properly scaffolded. This article takes up the challenge and offers details of how professional writing instruction can be expanded to include social media and offers best practices relating to discussion management and assignment design in SMT spaces.

Scaffolding SMT Instruction

In order to use SMT spaces successfully in professional writing classes, a task redesign is necessary. The learning objectives and learning outcomes may need to be broadened, and new

grading methods and assessment rubrics that encourage and reward collaborative public writing efforts have to be incorporated. The scaffoldings of “participation” for learning methodology & class practices, and “co-creation” for framing assignments & evaluating them, could prove helpful when instructors desire to tap into social media affordances. A close analysis is undertaken in the subsequent sections to examine how the participation and co-creation frameworks could enhance students’ professional writing skills.

The Participation Scaffold

Every university uses a learning management system (LMS) such as Canvas, Blackboard, Moodle, Desire2Learn, etc. The LMS systems offer discussion platforms that help build learning communities; however, the LMSs conform to the classroom-lecture model where information flows from the teacher to the students. As social media spaces are decentralized with all participants posting at the same hierarchical level, participation in social media spaces is more democratic and resets how information flows. Though asking students to tweet or curate posts in Snapchat, Facebook or LinkedIn forums, for instance, may involve sending pupils out to participate in various public learning spaces, the teacher can work out a method and guide students on how to avoid distractions and take control of their learning, even while encouraging students to make connections with peers, experts, and the community.

For professional writing instruction to successfully integrate SMT spaces into the learning arc, participation needs to be emphasized as a central theme of the learning experience. As Zheng (2013) clarifies, participation as an approach promotes students’ engagement, interaction, and collaboration in a discussion community (p. 134). Leppisaari et al. (2014) went on to describe the design of the SMT-enabled course as an effort “to consider genuine possibilities for students to work multi-professionally within a social media space” (p. 223). Put differently, teachers in this scenario need to search for educational ways to effectively connect students with each other and with professionals in public spaces within the SMT digital platform when designing their curriculum and classes.

Instructors may need to create scaffolds that support the learning within the SMT space, so students do not feel overwhelmed. As students move out of the LMS boundaries and begin participating in various social spaces, teachers can scaffold the process by breaking down the effort and quantifying the participation in words and frequency, so that students clearly understand what is required of them. Offering resources for negotiating through and conducting conversations inside SMT spaces can also be helpful. Another effective way the teacher could aid and scaffold group participation is by creating and describing unique roles and deliverables for each member within a group. Facilitating group work and discussions for students from different majors does not present a complication here because professional writing teachers as ‘Writing Across the Curriculum’ instructors are no strangers to integrating perspectives from various disciplines. While the goal of generating interdisciplinary interactions remains the same, the opportunities multiply when social media platforms are included in the arc of professional writing instruction.

Since knowledge creation or knowledge building is the goal, instructors can use participatory tools like TED-Ed lessons or VoiceThread to introduce and explain assignments. These tools have inbuilt asynchronous comment and discussion features that help teachers make themselves present in the student's learning as s/he explores the learning material or assignment instructions. When considering what tool to use to explain and scaffold assignments, the instructor may want to adopt a platform-wise approach since each social media outlet is unique.

The Co-creation Scaffold

SMT assignments offer openings for the collaborative co-construction of knowledge, such as the co-creation of a joint artifact or a collaboratively written text. As highlighted earlier, SMT assignments span from authoring blogs to wikis, generating webpages to podcasts, posting YouTube videos or vlogs to videocasts or screencasts. What is exciting about writing in these spaces is that this writing is in the public sphere and creates public conversations. Such writing, drives home the critical point to students that professional writing is outward looking. This makes it necessary to take a different paradigmatic approach to the way writing activities and assignments are viewed and designed.

A list of possible SMT assignments is offered here:

Host a discussion on Facebook group forum where students post regularly in order to develop a voice
Create audio/video presentations using Vimeo or VoiceThread
Task students to create a class /group wiki as a collaborative group exercise
Create radio-style podcasts on the topic of their research
Create a Tik Tok or YouTube video to demonstrate how to use a product
Have students tweet on a selected topic to curate tweets after using search on hashtags and analyzing users' posts
Write blogs containing a writer's or group of writers' observations, opinions, etc., and often having images and links to other websites and research using Blogger or Wordpress
Create webpages or websites individually or in groups using Wix, Weebly, or Google sites
Bookmark sites to share with group using social bookmarking tools as a subset of a larger website or wiki development project
Learn about visual rhetoric and building credibility while developing or enhancing professional profile on LinkedIn
Use Instagram, Snapchat, or Pinterest to curate links to create a story visually from published data about a CEO or company that the students choose
Create digital portfolio of work throughout the semester

Even if the list is not exhaustive, it might help professional writing teachers to get started on picking the social media platform they are most comfortable with for educational use in class. Having students write, maintain, and submit their reflection journals additionally as part of their SMT assignments can be a good practice as it would aid both students and teachers to track, ponder on, and evaluate their experience with SMT assignments.

SMT assignments not only have to be designed differently to lead to co-creation, but they are sometimes non-disposable and remain online for good. The latter fact can have positive implications since both students and teachers are likely, therefore, to put more effort into the process than they otherwise would. Also, as in onsite classes, a variety of worked resources or samples may need to be provided, and links and sources offered to enable students to succeed. As was referred to earlier, the teacher may want to carefully describe and define student roles in SMT assignments such as leader, editor, reviewer, recorder, and so on, even as s/he sets up meeting procedures and ground rules for a group's behavior and accountability. Problems that arise because of clashes within a group need to be anticipated and resolution processes defined. Requirements and expectations, as well as directions and guidelines, have to be specified in writing so students can refer back to them time and again. As in all group assignments, it is necessary to clarify if and how a group's grade will suffer if a member does not perform. This way, the teacher can not only ensure that students do not get distracted in social media spaces but also monitor how they are faring, interacting, and learning.

While all professional writing assignments need clear explanations of student deliverables, bringing in co-creation and SMT spaces implies that the writing teacher, if s/he has to successfully steer students through them, has to put in special efforts to reap the benefits of the unique affordances of the SMT platform utilized. In the end, the goal of the instructor is to efficiently sensitize students about how SMT locations of networked digital writing offer a more public space and wider audience than in-class academic writing, and therefore require a careful, calibrated approach.

Assessing Social Media Participation

Since learning and assessment are two sides of a coin, I now explore how assessment and rubrics need to be redesigned because of the inclusion of social media in the curriculum. If participation is the metaphor for learning, co-creation is the at the core of assignment and assessment in SMT based instruction. As far back as 2008, Vie equated the creation of emergent knowledge through SMT assignments as the designing of a "participatory democracy" through what he described as the SMT engineered "moment of possibility" towards a "convergence culture" that overturns "old rules," and "forces old hierarchies into a negotiation" (p. 19). If such a possibility has to be realized every time an SMT is used, a shift is required in the way SMT projects are envisaged.

As assessments are an important part of professional writing instruction, instructors, using collaborative SMT multimedia assignments with distinct planning, writing, and reflection components, need to develop keen awareness of both the challenges and the capabilities of the

platform the assignment uses so they can generate appropriate assessment criteria. Also, as SMT writing changes the conventional dynamic between teacher and writer, writer and reader, writer and peer, evaluation becomes a task that requires careful calibration. With SMT, the distances between the student and the teacher, and the writer and reader are reduced almost in the same proportion as the responsibility and the visibility of the student-writer is increased.

Rubrics that take into account the affordances of social media and measure the achievements of SMT-based assignments must offer ways to put a number not just on the success of a group's capacity to co-create but also on the group's ability to take advantage of the possibilities of the medium. Every rubric needs to recognize the difficulty as well as reward elements of interactivity and collaboration in the submissions of students. Hence rubrics need categories for content, group cohesion, writing skill, and technical quality with the teacher determining the weightages for each category. While teachers may want to offer category definitions and weights depending on what they perceive as the course's requirements, instituting technical quality as a criterion takes cognizance of the fact that the assignments are being done through social media. Similarly, having writing quality and group cohesion as parameters is important as they recognize, award, and reward social dynamics and group output. While each instructor would opt for varying weights for each parameter, rubrics for all social media-based assignments would need categories for content, technical/ media quality, collaboration, and writing skill. (Please see the footnote for links to possible model rubrics for social media assignments.¹)

Just as with assessment and rubrics, the affordances underpinning of SMT assignment results in feedback taking on new dimensions. The way feedback is offered to SMT assignments ought to be interactive too and incorporate a multimedia dimension, whenever possible. Video feedback (or Veedback) can prove useful while grading these assignments as they are more in keeping with the advanced nature of the co-creation projects the instructors are now evaluating. Amongst other benefits, such an approach leverages the capability of audio and video to address emotional aspects of learning that create intimacy between the learner and the facilitator. These tools offer the teacher the ability to give feedback to assignments in a manner that seems like the professor is in the room.

A valuable option here is screencasts. Screencasts are "digital recordings of the activity on one's computer screen, accompanied by voice-over narration. Screencasting can be used by professors in any class to respond to any assignment that is submitted in an electronic format, be it a Word document, text file, PowerPoint presentation, Excel spreadsheet, website, or video" (Thompson and Lee, 2012, n.p.). While screencasting software is widely used in the corporate world for coaching, marketing, demonstrations, and training, studies have shown that screencast video feedback can also prove to be an excellent academic vehicle since it allows instructors to offer in-depth explanatory feedback even as the instructor screencast the

¹ [Wiki rubric](#) and [Twitter rubric](#) by Karen Franker; [Podcast rubric](#) by Ann Bell; and [Webpage rubric](#) by Joan Vandervelde. These resources are published publicly online by the University of Wisconsin – Stout.

work s/he is commenting on. In addition to screencasting, other ways of using voice—through video recordings, audio pdfs (portable document files), or voice thread links— can also be used to provide feedback on students' writing assignments that bring in immediacy, create rapport, and offer support for the writer in ways that traditional written comments cannot. Whatever be the tool used, feedback is a fitting tool for offering feedback to SMT assignments for its ability to put interactive technology into educational use.

Conclusion: Moving to Edutopia?

Through the discussion of new scaffolds required in using social media spaces for professional writing purposes, the article made an attempt to bridge the gap between what is required in the workplace and what is being taught in academia. Interuniversity dialogs, company-university conversations, and sharing of ideas and experiences in using social media in the classroom are also required, so we can learn from each other's experience and perspectives. Since best practices related to SMT use are still evolving, it is necessary to share insights on using affordances and social software tools as this article just did. What must be universally accepted is that it is impossible to return to a static web and old ways of teaching. As there is no escape from the responsibility of developing students into professionals who are comfortable writing on SMTs, educators need to embrace new approaches to SMT enhanced professional writing instruction that emphasize participation and co-creation as methods of learning and assessment respectively. The ability of students to succeed in their future professional roles as SMT content writers depends on the decisions and swiftness of educators and educational institutions to quickly adopt and adapt.

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