

Interrogating Influence: Leveraging the Power of Social Media

The authors worked with preservice teachers and youth in a juvenile detention center to pilot a curriculum focused on critical engagement with online text.

Not that long ago, discussions in teachers' lounges about teaching critical literacy were progressive when they included teaching digital reading. As our field deepened and our conceptions of how readers make meaning while reading online changed, we began to address aspects of critical reading such as determining authenticity of websites, discerning the importance of graphically persuasive design elements, and navigating multistep pathways when reading online (Bean 10; Castek and Beach 555). As tempted as we may be to retreat into this former way of teaching critical literacies, we recognize the speed with which social and political forces have added new demands for readers. Today, tweens and adolescents must know how to recognize persuasive rhetoric and discern outright lies as they consume online texts through social media. And the need for more complex instruction in critical literacies does not end with strengthening their consumption of online text; it also must prepare them to be savvy producers of it.

Adolescents are most likely to find their news on social media sites ("News and America's Kids"), which means that some teens are also likely to grapple with understanding the world as they debate the news via social media. This includes "flop accounts" on Instagram where teens post about something they believe is unacceptable, or a "fail" (Lorenz). They may vent their feelings about a famous artist posting homophobic ideas or about a model who appropriated clothing or a hairstyle from another culture.

These social media accounts are often devoted to politically charged topics. Then discussions may proceed with half-truths and lies without concern for verifying opinions with credible research. This phenomenon leads many teens to shape understandings of the world through conversations with their peers, who tend to either totally agree with their opinions or totally disagree, with little room for developing critical consciousness and open-minded pursuit of consensus. Yet, it is striking how ingeniously adolescents use language, perhaps none more striking than their agility at using hashtags to powerfully distill ideas into memorable forms. From Snapchat to Instagram, teens prevail in their proficiency in this relatively new literate practice.

As we wrestle with the reality that many teens are both entrenched in and entranced with social media, we wish to consider what this means for our classrooms. The purpose of this article is to offer an example lesson that took place at a juvenile detention center that shows how critical literacies, involving both the consumption and production of texts, may be developed. In addition, we call for teachers to invite students, particularly those students who are often marginalized and ignored as critical readers and

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writers, to consider how social media can be used as a focus for lessons addressing critical literacies.

EDUCATION IN JUVENILE DETENTION FACILITIES

Even detained or incarcerated youth have a legal right to an education, though typically the education they receive is characterized as both a problem and a solution (Sander et al. 1695). Research has linked low levels of academic achievement, particularly reading and writing, to higher rates of recidivism (Katsiyannis et al. 178). Educational thinkers have tried to remediate youth's academic abilities by developing interventions, such as corrective reading programs, to narrow the deficit gap (Drakeford 32). These programs, however, tend to focus on those reading skills considered generalizable, such as decoding, fluency, and basic comprehension, so that students can apply the skills across texts. As a result, reading and writing are typically taught as skills to be acquired.

Teaching students to read and write in ways that emphasize only the decoding and comprehension of text positions literacy as an “autonomous and, therefore, neutral entity or skill set, namely the ability to read and write” (Morrell 4). Educators have grown increasingly concerned “with the unintended consequences of an exclusive focus on a narrowly defined and conceived dominant literacy agenda” (3). And while a number of scholars have defined critical literacy in particular ways (Morrell 5; Lewison et al. xxiii), Robert Petrone and Lisa Bullard explain that

[i]n educational contexts, the term *critical* often refers to “high-order” thinking skills, such as reasoning, synthesis, and analysis. However, educators who use the term *critical* in relation to *critical literacy* do so to draw attention to issues of representation and normativity, relations of power and ideology, and practices of oppression, resistance, and/or liberation. (123; italics in original)

Being positioned as students who are illiterate, or struggling readers and writers in need of remediation, means that youth in juvenile detention settings are not often provided a curriculum that challenges them to consider that “no text is neutral; all texts

are positioned, and they work to position the people who consume them” (Janks 96), potentially leaving this population of learners vulnerable to misinformation campaigns. We believe all students need opportunities to learn how to critically analyze texts and to ask, *Whose interest is being served?* (when reading texts) and *How am I positioning others?* (when composing texts).

Because we do not believe the stereotype that youth in juvenile detention centers are struggling readers and writers, and because of our belief that all learners should have access to critical learning opportunities, we created a Summer Learning Institute for youth in a juvenile detention facility. This program was part of an ongoing partnership between the authors and the detention center. The overall goal aligned with the belief that *all* students, especially our most marginalized youth, deserve an intellectually rich curriculum and that teachers need to be prepared to address this need.

We first conceptualized the curriculum and then worked closely with two teachers from the detention center and graduate students who were enrolled in a Master in the Arts of Teaching (MAT) program to plan the instruction. The teacher candidates worked in teams to implement the curriculum with our support and the support of the detention center teachers. Because youth in juvenile detention tend to be a transient population, with the average length of stay being thirteen days, the Summer Learning Institute was designed to be short, but intensive, running for two hours each day over a three-week period.

All learning during the institute was focused on issues in the city where the detention center was located and where most of the students lived. For example, students designed logos and created sculptures that represented the city, they explored how land is acquired and developed, and they studied historical trends in population. The sustained learning was interdisciplinary and responsive to students' diverse and context-based needs. The curriculum was based on the following ideas:

- Instruction should provide opportunities for students to engage in critical literacy practices that uncover the positionality of the

author and the reader to discern how use of language provides social capital and power.

- Instruction must be designed to value students' communities, cultures, identities, and experiences.
- Interdisciplinary learning should provide students opportunities to question, critique, and analytically make sense of their worlds.
- Pedagogical approaches must emphasize literacy as a social and cultural practice to nurture and support all learners.

This article describes a single lesson that took place during a two-hour time period in which students were asked to develop a social media campaign for the city. The lesson occurred during the last week of the Summer Learning Institute, after students had been studying issues, trends, and possible opportunities within the city. Preservice teachers designed the lesson to help students become critical consumers of social media and think about how they would create a social media campaign using some of the techniques they learned. We selected this lesson as an example because it illustrates the different layers of thinking students must do to discern the intentions behind carefully crafted social media messages.

THE CONTEXT

The detention center is located in an urban setting in the Midwest. It is a short-term pre- and post-adjudication correctional facility. During the calendar year in which this program took place, 562 youth were detained with the average daily population consisting of thirty-six youth and the average length of detainment recorded as thirteen days. Of the 562 youth, 107 were female, and of that population, fifty-four self-identified as Black, seven as biracial, one as Native Hawaiian/Pacific, and forty-five as White. Of the 455 males detained, two identified as Asian, 310 as Black, thirty-four as biracial, one as Native Hawaiian/Pacific, and 108 as White.

THE LESSON

The scope of the institute broadly explored the historical and social issues of the city, but this particular

lesson was designed to explore how the city could represent those issues using social media. The goal was for students to be able to read recent local news articles from a questioning stance, identify problems, and offer potential solutions. The lesson specifically drew on the disciplines of English language arts and social studies, as this was an opportunity to encourage students to cultivate their civic identities. The questions guiding the learning included "How do people (from this particular city) use social media?" and "How can someone use social media to promote their ideas and agenda?"

It is important to note that while they are in the detention center, students do not have access to the Internet or social media. This was a constraint; however, knowing that many of the students reported using social media in their personal lives underscored the importance of the lesson, even though the students were not actually online during the instruction.

The lesson began by analyzing LeBron James's social media accounts, particularly Instagram. LeBron James is a strong figure in the students' lives, not only because of his basketball career but also because of his relationship to the city where the detention center is located. Furthermore, James is a strong presence on social media, using it to highlight his connections to brands, to share personal information with fans, and to promote charitable causes.



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Students received a handout of two posts from James's Instagram account. The first post depicted James's daughter on a tricycle with the caption: "My Princess Z wasn't messing around about getting outside today! Told her she better get as much as she can cause it maybe 20 below 0 tomorrow!" It included the hashtags #DaddysLilAngel and #!Ain'tRocking witThatFaceThoughSheMadeThough (James). We

asked the students to think independently about the post and then share their thoughts about it with the class. We used guiding questions to scaffold the discussion. Although we can't know how students would have responded without these questions, we do know that crafting questions supported

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students in making critical noticings about the Instagram post. Specifically, students were asked to consider the following:

- What do you notice about this post?
- What is the image?
- What does the caption say?
- What do the hashtags mean?
- What do you learn about James?
- Who is the audience James is trying to reach?
- How do you feel after viewing and reading this post?

Students responded that the post made them feel happy to recognize that James cares for his daughter and calls her princess. They also noted the comment about the weather and how, in this particular state, spring can be sunny one day and snowing the next. They shared that they felt James was trying to connect with his fans and build relationships with fans by sharing aspects of his personal life.

The second post featured a close-up image of James's shoes during a basketball game. The caption

read, "Walk with me! We're all Kings and Queens!!! I'm King" and the hashtags #StriveforGreatness and #RWTW (James). We used the same questions to guide students' noticings; however, this time we also asked students how the posts differed. This was important as we wanted to call students' attention to how purpose and audience influenced the post.

Though the students said they thought the post was inspirational because James called his fans "Kings and Queens," they recognized that the post was a marketing tool for his shoes. They knew that RWTW stood for Roll with the Winners, which is a line of clothing. Students noted that "kings," "queens," and "winners" were words that conveyed ideas of privilege, prestige, and power. They explained that the audience consisted of fans, or people James wanted to be his fans, who would buy his merchandise and the merchandise he supports.

The questions in this lesson served as scaffolds to help students understand how James was positioning himself and how he was using images, words, and hashtags to create social capital. Guiding questions and conversation stimulated background knowledge and helped students make connections between familiar and unfamiliar concepts. Through the close analysis of Instagram posts, we wanted the students to interrogate the positionalities of both the author and the reader and to consider the balance of power and social capital each entity wields.

The second part of the lesson asked the students to act as campaign managers for the city and to create a series of Instagram posts. As noted, over the course of the week, students had explored important issues within the city and read a variety of texts, including the local newspaper, city maps, and city demographic data, to understand how the city responds to various issues. Because we wanted students to think of themselves as learners with ownership and choice, we encouraged them to explore issues relevant to their lives and interests. Students expressed an interest in focusing their social media campaigns on entertainment options within the city. This topic allowed the students to focus on the things they liked to do in the city. They also saw the logic of developing a social marketing campaign that highlights positive aspects of the city, such as

entertainment options, and could be used to draw people to the city.

As they produced Instagram posts, the students used a template we created on tablets. We provided folders with pictures of the city, and the students used drag-and-drop features to include the selected photo on the template (that looked like Instagram) and then created captions and hashtags. (Because of security and issues of privacy and confidentiality, these posts, however, were not shared online, and the city name has been replaced with “city” here in the hashtags.)

In keeping with the notion that a city campaign would emphasize the strengths of the city, students considered how their posts could position the city positively. One student, Emila, chose to focus on historical sites that could also serve as entertainment (student names are pseudonyms). Her Instagram post focused on a picture of a historical railway car going through the city. Her caption was, “Not only are the railroad tracks a historic monument for our city, but also a perfect place to build memories and take pictures!” She included the hashtags #trains, #historicmonument, and #citylife. Her second post focused on a famous historical estate, also a national historic landmark. The photo showed the home decorated for Christmas and she included the caption, “The Hall is always beautiful no matter what the season!” Her hashtags were #treelightings, #4seasons, and #citylife. Emila’s goal was to help people see how the historic sites within the city could also serve as entertainment and to project an excitement about famous city landmarks. She was hoping to reach an audience who wasn’t familiar with these places to show how the city already had resources and venues for recreation and entertainment.

Another student, Cameron, created a series of posts that were linked using the hashtag #Cityown. His first post included a picture of a tiger from the local zoo, captioned, “Do you live in the city but want to see a lion, tiger, or bear? Why not go somewhere you can see all three?” He then changed the hashtag by adding “zoo” the #Cityownzoo. His next image featured a popular burger chain, with the caption, “Are you hungry after leaving the zoo, but don’t want to leave your car? Well, come to Swensons drive in and get a gally boy and our famous California

drink.” #Cityowndrivein. Cameron also wanted to highlight places in the city that already serve as recreation and entertainment options, using rhetorical statements to help people think about their current options within the city. He used hashtags to create consistency between posts and to reinforce that these places are “City’s own” and that people should recognize the options the city already provides.

THE DISCUSSION

Students in juvenile detention facilities, who because they have been marked with the stigma that they are struggling readers and writers, are typically provided with a curriculum that is skills-oriented. Because of the emphasis placed on increasing their abilities, we continue to marginalize these students when we fail to provide instruction that is culturally sustaining, meaningful, and positions them as co-constructors of knowledge.

It is pivotal that we equip students who have been detained or incarcerated with tools for questioning texts, particularly the texts that dominate their lives. They need to be aware that texts are produced for specific purposes and audiences, so that they recognize how people, including themselves, are positioned in particular ways. While analyzing LeBron James’s posts may have seemed mostly interesting to the students at first, we wanted them to analyze how James uses language in powerful ways—to make connections to his fan base and to sell and market his apparel and footwear. The goal was to help students deconstruct how these images, captions, and hashtags worked together to promote and position. Teachers can use social media sites, such as Instagram, to analyze the underlying messages that people are trying to convey. As students grow in their understanding of how to craft short texts and how to pair them with stimulating images, they learn to represent their causes and concerns in ways that will persuade others to engage as well.


In addition, we believed it was important to explore hashtags with the students to examine how these microblogging practices represent the larger ideas within the post and how they connect the post to broader, more encompassing ideas, movements, and beliefs. Hashtags have fueled political and

social movements, such as #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo, and educators have begun to explore how young adults use hashtags as literate practices. In his research on young adults' social media practices, Benjamin W. Gleason found that

[t]hrough hashtags, young people not only create dynamic, co-constructed, multimodal stories that emphasize social relationships, but are themselves co-created as their stories take shape through the same hashtags. Hashtags stick around, spread easily, can be searched, and are highly visible. Stories told for particular audiences become remediated through new contexts, new audiences, and with new information. (177)

Gleason established three concepts to explain how young adults use social media and hashtags: orientating practices, mobilizing practices, and reflective emergence. Orientating posts document dominant cultural practices, while mobilizing practices leverage social relationships. Finally, reflective emergence demonstrates a metacognitive reflection of purpose and possibility. The posts and hashtags of the two students featured in this article were most aligned to Gleason's mobilizing hashtags as they called others to participate and engage. Their goal was to organize others and to promote the important places in their communities. For example, Cameron used the possessive word "own" in his hashtag to highlight his allegiance to attractions and spaces that he viewed as important to his city, as well as to call others to claim these spaces.

When we have students critically analyze and write hashtags, we have conversations with them about how hashtags emerge and become popular, how information can quickly spread, and how people form virtual communities and social relationships. Hashtags allow students to actively participate in movements and social communities that they might not otherwise have access to. Gleason notes, "as they become more competent, they learn to mobilize resources as they participate. Eventually, they may even reflect on their practices and take on new ways of thinking, acting, and being as a result of this participation" (176). Therefore, it becomes important that we teach students how these social media practices document cultural practices, reflect networks, and leverage relationships and positions (178).

Ultimately, through the partnership we have established to develop this project, we hope to prepare students who are detained to view literacy not simply as a basic skill to acquire; rather, we want to engage them in increasingly sophisticated ways while reading and producing texts in multiple mediums. Teaching students in the detention center to develop critical perspectives about social media is incredibly important as it is often a dominant source of information and form of communication. They will not be fully equipped unless we help them understand that power can be found in rhetorical forms. Dissecting the messages found in these seemingly innocuous texts and interrogating the aims of their producers is a key critical literacy practice we should teach. 

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

On a field trip, students encounter new places and concepts that the teacher wants the students to remember once the class returns to the school building. Using Instagram to document these experiences helps students easily recall the events of the field trip. These photos inspire students as they create a newspaper about their trip using an online interactive tool. <http://bit.ly/2DXAa9o>