



Facebook as a Functional Tool & Critical Resource

Mark Lipton

Students are not friends. Teaching is not a popularity contest. No matter what philosophy of teaching or approach to schooling, there is little disagreement about a necessary distance between instructors and their students. We are not equal.

Yet, despite much controversy, I have taken up Facebook as a digital tool in my large lecture halls for a variety of reasons and used a number of pedagogical approaches. I challenge myself to consider the social media world from the point of view of today's students. Consider how the average eight to 18 year-old spends almost seven and a half hours each day with media (Rideout, Foehr and Roberts). As these young people enter university and are searching through the course catalogue, many of them select my introductory elective course in Media Studies, a lecture with an increasing enrollment often with over 200 students. In the last five years, I've noticed many of these students enter the classroom with a laptop or some portable device giving them instant access to the university's incredibly powerful Wi-Fi signal. The lecture hall itself is considered a "smart classroom" providing student access to power for plugging in and instructors access to an elegant podium equipped with a number of ways to connect devices for projection onto the theatre-size screens overhead. It is the context of the smart classroom and the increasing laptop use

that led me to employ Facebook as a digital tool in my lecture hall. The aims of this short essay are to identify my motivations for using Facebook, describe methods and practices of this classroom use as a functional tool and critical resource, then to discuss current pedagogical challenges.

Why Facebook?

The Chronicle of Higher Education reported in May 2010 that approximately 80% of today's professors use social media. The survey of *Social Media in Higher Education* (Tinti-Kane, Seaman and Levy) optimistically concluded "while some faculty remain skeptical, the overall opinion is quite positive, with faculty reporting that social media has value for teaching by over a four to one margin." However, these numbers do not necessarily translate into innovative curricula or pedagogy. As assessed in the *Chronicle*, approximately ten percent of survey responses "represent active uses of social media tools, meaning professors expecting students to post or comment on or create something" in contrast to faculty who use social media as an information resource or what this report referred to as "passive activities like reading or watching a video" (Perry). I've noticed a similar divide about digital media use among the faculty on my campus. Many of my peers use today's tools but not in their classrooms; some teach with the tools but (often) primarily as a resource for information. Some embrace the world of digital media yet others dig in their heels, particularly taking a hard line against laptops in the lecture hall. As class sizes increase, those faculty teaching large lectures are particularly challenged to address the sea of hundreds of students all staring into their own laptop screen. The blue haze of Facebook reflected in students' faces is usually considered a distraction from the sage on the stage, not an educational opportunity, driving many professors to ask students to "close their laptops." In fact, there is a lengthy and ongoing debate about the use of Facebook by faculty on university campuses. As reported by John Bowman, "some teachers and lecturers are embracing Facebook and Twitter as new ways of communicating with students, and some universities and school boards are banning access to social networking tools entirely, citing security concerns." For many faculty, the ban is supported because using commercial products can lead to distraction.

Research has started to frame debates about distractions versus multitasking within sociological and neurological contexts. My students often insist that a multitasking-learning environment will best serve their purposes. Former Apple and Microsoft executive Linda Stone coined the phrase "continuous

partial attention" to describe students who "are scanning all available data sources for the optimum inputs" (Rainie). Crudely put, Stone's approach describes a cognitive strategy that is always on, in a variety of digital media networks. Stone introduces different cognitive motivations and effects to the concept of multitasking and I apply these within learning contexts. Eyal Ophir, Clifford Nass and Anthony Wagner conducted a series of experiments about student media multitaskers and their information processing styles. Empirical results demonstrated how "heavy media multitaskers are more susceptible to interference from irrelevant environmental stimuli and from irrelevant representations in memory. This led to the surprising result that heavy media multitaskers performed worse on a test of task-switching ability, likely due to reduced ability to filter out interference from the irrelevant task set" (15583). For Rainie, of the Pew Internet & American Life Project, students who "operate in such a state are not as productive as those who stay on task. They also do not make distinctions between the zones of work and leisure, consumer and producer, education and entertainment." S. Craig Watkins describes this phenomenon as one of the more intriguing paradoxes of today's digital media environments: "we consume more and less at the same time" (159).

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It is within this context that my interest in using Facebook as a mode of critical inquiry was sparked. In other words, my teaching with Facebook is an effort to constrain students' multitasking behavior by providing instruction as to when and how to use the site. My curriculum continually changes as the site itself evolves; my pedagogy relies on various investigative strategies that allow me to adapt to the changing nature of social media. For Media Studies faculty, it is important to teach both *about* and *through* digital tools. Teaching about Facebook includes contextual information about its social, cultural, and historical dimensions; teaching through Facebook includes the praxis of using this tool (along with or in conjunction with others) to both process and distribute information. Kirsten Drotner reframes this discourse about digital media pedagogy by asking whether digital or multimodal literacy should be "defined as a functional tool or as a critical resource?" (182). Simply put, my answer is: both.

Teaching with Facebook is a way for me to engage my students, since many of them will be on the site before, after, and during any lecture. More than engagement, using Facebook allows me to build a bridge between my classroom curricula and what my students are doing outside the lecture hall. I must

admit that student expertise with digital media often exceeds my own, and my attempts at using Facebook function as a common language that sets up my classroom as an experimental space allowing students to take risks, make connections, and participate with an alternative teaching style. As much as there are a number of other Facebook educators—there is even a Facebook groups for educators—I am certain that on my university campus I am the only instructor using this social network. My university administration has accused me of subverting our institutional course management system. They are correct. Facebook may be a commercial enterprise, but I argue that students can maintain a Facebook identity after they leave university. The work done in our lecture as represented in our Facebook group is something that lasts beyond a typical university course management system. In other words, access to the information, discussion, links, and learning is not cut off once the course is over.

Thinking about Facebook as a classroom management system is an example of how I use it as a *functional tool*. Similarly, I also demonstrate, manage, and model an online identity for students, reinforcing what I call “responsible” Facebook use. The functionality of Facebook also works as a tool for class participation and digital portfolios. These are some of the important ways that I teach through Facebook.

At the same time, I believe it is also important to teach students about Facebook. Typical of a first year Media Studies survey course, my curriculum included material such as the changing role of technology, the implications of media ownership, and the relationships among policy, law, and media institutions. When I began to teach about Facebook, I was able to use this digital media as an example to discuss such related issues as the nature of social hierarchies and networks; the politics of privacy; the changing nature of net neutrality; cloud computing; copyright and creative commons; politics of media ownership; and others. Facebook can function as the yardstick from which other examples are measured and the touchstone from which other elements of my curricula are judged.

Watkins points to the Pew Internet & American Life Project and their attention to the year 2006—the same year I took up Facebook in the lecture hall. He writes, “2006 was the tipping point for high-speed Internet connections, turning what Pew, two years earlier, called the *broadband elite* into the *broadband masses*. Furthermore, 2006 was the year that three of the most celebrated

Web 2.0 brands—MySpace, Facebook, and YouTube—established a formidable presence in American popular culture. Inspired by the popular explosion of new web brands and the commercial potential of what Net-entrepreneurs cleverly began marketing as Web 2.0, *Time* magazine named user-generated media its “Person of the Year” (210). In 2006, I began believing it was important to consider my students as members of the broadband masses and to speak to them through and about digital media in meaningful ways. My curriculum and pedagogy has me teaching with and about a number of digital tools—not just Facebook. But now, to make my Facebook use more explicit, I turn my attention to a specific example of how I start one of my Facebook lectures.

A Day in the Life

I begin my course by framing the study of media and communication theory within two historical contexts or schools: a semiotic school with a focus on the production and exchange of meanings; and a process school that focuses on the transmission of messages. Promising to address both throughout the semester, I begin with attention to the latter by providing history about Shannon and Weaver’s “Mathematical Theory of Communications.” Developed during WWII for Bell Telephone, this theory approached the problem of how to send a maximum amount of information along a given channel, and how to measure the capacity of any one channel to carry information. Implications of this theory, for example, concerning how senders and receivers encode and decode information or how transmitters use the channels and media of communication are applicable to larger questions of human communication systems.

To demonstrate the implications of efficiency, predictability, accuracy, and entropy, I ask students to play a game. They have all played it before—though never in a large lecture hall. The game is “broken telephone.” The lecture hall is divided in half by a centre aisle. I tell the class that this “game” is a competition and they need to be a team player: team left or team right. I walk to one back corner of the hall and whisper a sentence into the ear of the student sitting in the last row. Then I whisper the same sentence into the ear of the student sitting in the other back corner. These students explicitly know that their job is to pass the message to their neighbors. When the message gets to the last student, he or she writes the final sentence on the interactive white board. Of course, during this “game” my lecture does not stop. I return to my discussion about information theory and how the model can describe a process of one person affecting the behavior or state of mind of another; the

role of redundancy as the tool for combating entropy in message transmission; and the properties of codes and channels. At the end of the game, it is clear that entropy has entered the game and the original sentence and its meaning are completely lost—by both teams. The final sentences, however, have provided us with some humor and are the departure point for setting up our class Facebook group.

At this point during class, one of my teaching assistants takes control of the podium and begins to set up a Facebook group. The results from our game of broken telephone—the two awkward, meaningless sentences—are discussed and then voted on as possible group names. For example, the sentence “Mark Lipton lives in Toronto with his dog Bingo” whispered by 100 students led to the phrase “Harry has some berries.” We had arrived at a name that we could all remember. My class groups are usually open because I insist on an approach to media learning that is open, social, and connected. However, for many teachers, a closed group will make more sense, provide more privacy, and will require students to request to join and/or see the group. Before I proceed with this group I need to spend a bit of time discussing some of our rules of engagement.

Once the group is set up, students are verbally invited to join. Our Facebook group is not mandatory. There is no grade for a student’s Facebook use or participation. Students often become motivated to use it as a tool through which they can participate. In other words, students understand that throughout each lecture, one of the teaching assistants is monitoring the group wall and discussion lists. During class, when a student has a question, idea, related link or resource, he or she can post to the wall and the assistant responds, raises the issues with me, and/or brings it to the attention of the class as a whole.

The Facebook group wall is projected on the screen at regular intervals throughout any given lecture. I refer to the page, point to the screen, post links, and click through posted links during lecture. When a student has posted something significant to the wall I often invite him or her to address the class; Facebook is a way to constrain and contain class discussion. Like other classroom management systems, Facebook allows me to follow threads on discussion boards and post announcements. I often look to the group page, wall, and discussion list during my class preparations for links, ideas, and connections. I try to respond to posted items at the beginning of each lecture so that everyone who has participated feels heard. Students are asked

to reflect on this Facebook use at the end of the year. Many of them claim my uses to be “interesting” or “innovative.” From my point of view, what is of major significance is the quantity and quality of student communication posted on the wall. When students are given free reign without the stress of assessment, I notice what they find important, where I need to explicate, and when I should stop to give them voice to articulate their concerns. Some students never leave the group, using it to stay connected to classmates; others drop it as soon as the course ends.

I must take a moment here to say a word or two about student resistance to Facebook. There are always a few students who argue that Facebook “belongs to them,” how I “ruin” their Facebook, and/or that my teaching practice is like a day at the arcade. It is clear these students want Facebook to remain nonacademic. My response to students is consistent and rational: there is no penalty for resistance. In my last experience having a Facebook group, there were three students who were not members of Facebook. Of note, I think, is that these students were politically motivated to resist Facebook, passionate about the subject of Media Studies, often older (not first year) students, and usually had stronger written and oral communication skills than their class peers. Thus, when I requested they look on to their neighbors’ laptop if they wanted to post something to the group, I met with little resistance. Projecting the Facebook wall during the lecture proved a powerful tool to moderate discussion, share announcements, and follow student thinking; because I could point to the projected Facebook page and discuss its contents, I provided an opportunity for every student to see how other members of the class were using it as a digital tool, to model behavior, and reward leadership. Ergo, even if a student chose not to participate with the group, he or she could still somewhat benefit from Facebook as the classroom management system.

These are some of the ways I try to explain my *intention* for setting up a Facebook group. I also am trying to focus student attention—if they are going to be on Facebook, at least let them be using it for class, and let them be using it responsibly. At this point, I ask students about their Facebook privacy settings and their understanding of privacy on the Internet in general. I give a few examples that I hope make explicit the importance of this subject. One that students respond to is the story of how Facebook is used by prosecuting attorneys to search for character evidence, and its corresponding penal consequences. The story of Joshua Lipton (no relation) has stayed with me. Two weeks after a DWI incident that seriously injured a woman, this 20-year-old

university student attended a Halloween party dressed in a black-and-white striped shirt and an orange jumpsuit. He was tagged on Facebook with the label “Jail Bird.” The prosecutor handling the case displayed the picture during the trial. The judge called the pictures “depraved” and ordered a two-year prison sentence (Tucker). Before my students begin looking at their own Facebook pictures, I ask them all to count into groups of ten. Each group must leave the room for twenty minutes and discuss Facebook privacy. They are instructed to post to the Facebook discussion page the top ten ways to maintain privacy on Facebook. When they return to the lecture hall, I examine their lists by pulling up the discussion page and reviewing their language. But we do more than talk about privacy. This opportunity allows me to introduce other theoretical concepts while I demonstrate how to use the various settings. In other words, I share with students how I manage my Facebook *identity*.

By identity I mean to introduce a point of view and a theory about the relationship between the self and society. Our class discussion about online identity, I argue, supports the point of view that humans do not have a single self which acts in a variety of ways or different roles. Rather, this discussion of Facebook is my foray into a sociological and semiological perspective that describes how human identity is the result of a transaction between the self and a communication environment. Here I consider Facebook as a critical resource by pointing to my own uses of this social networking site to describe elements of this theory: i.e., that humans are a social species; we must live in groups; people’s behavior can be understood as a result of their relations with others; we don’t have one single true self; we have a variety of selves that are evoked by our relations with others; who you are—your identity—at any given time is a function of the relationship or situation that you’re in. For example, Angela Thomas’ discussions about, “the semiotics of online identity” (6) as “a major area of Internet research” (17) are made concrete through personal narratives and descriptions of Facebook practices. My social uses of Facebook help me maintain old friendships, find lost connections, build new networks and grow the “groups” in which I choose to live. Most people understand my Facebook behavior based on their past and current uses of this and other social networking sites. For some “friends,” I “over post” status updates using codes (usually Twitter hashtags) they do not understand. For other “friends,” I provide status updates during professional conferences as a form of live microblogging and this tool works to build resources and make connections. And finally, I think I have another group of “friends” who appreciate what I am doing even if they don’t follow every update or link. My

argument is that with each group of “friends” I have a unique identity. Since these identities are evoked through my uses of Facebook, it is important for me to manage my identity by understanding Facebook’s functionality.

This leads to a lesson about what I’ve begun to term Facebook “literacy.” In order to use Facebook—and not be used by it—one needs to understand how to operate its settings and options. Furthermore, this lesson provides the framework for making the rules of engagement between my students and me explicit. To begin, I have my own Facebook page open and I show students where to find the site’s privacy settings and how I use them. I also demonstrate and model how to operate the site’s (ever-changing) options for managing my online identity by editing friends, pages, and account information. These are the basic skills that one must know if they are going to use Facebook with the greatest efficiency, so there are no semantic, technical, or effectiveness problems.

As I reflect on this teaching practice I am struck by some pedagogical challenges. Here I share some lessons learned: I will not “friend” my students. However, I am more than happy to accept a student “friend request” and I make explicit that any student/“friends” are added to a list that I use to block them from some of my more personal Facebook information, such as my photo albums. I try to ensure that students do not come up in my news feed and I suggest that students block me from their news feed. I ask students to tag me if they want my attention—but if I feel like they are demanding too much attention, I will let them know. Thus far, this has never continued to the point where I had to block a student altogether. I prefer to keep my communication with students as public as possible. Thus, I will not Facebook chat with students because it cannot be saved. Rather than fear any inaccurate recollections or negative accusations, I ask students to post to the group wall so that everyone can participate in the discussion. Our group page is not the place for complaining, whining, or unsupported criticism. I continually remind students that our Facebook group—and increasingly my Facebook use as a whole, is intended to provide students with leadership opportunities and confidence.

When I consider Facebook or any digital learning tool within the context of equity, I am reminded, as Darin Barney notes, “for some people access to the Internet is a source of empowerment, autonomy, and agency, [but] for many it simply means connection to a technological infrastructure in

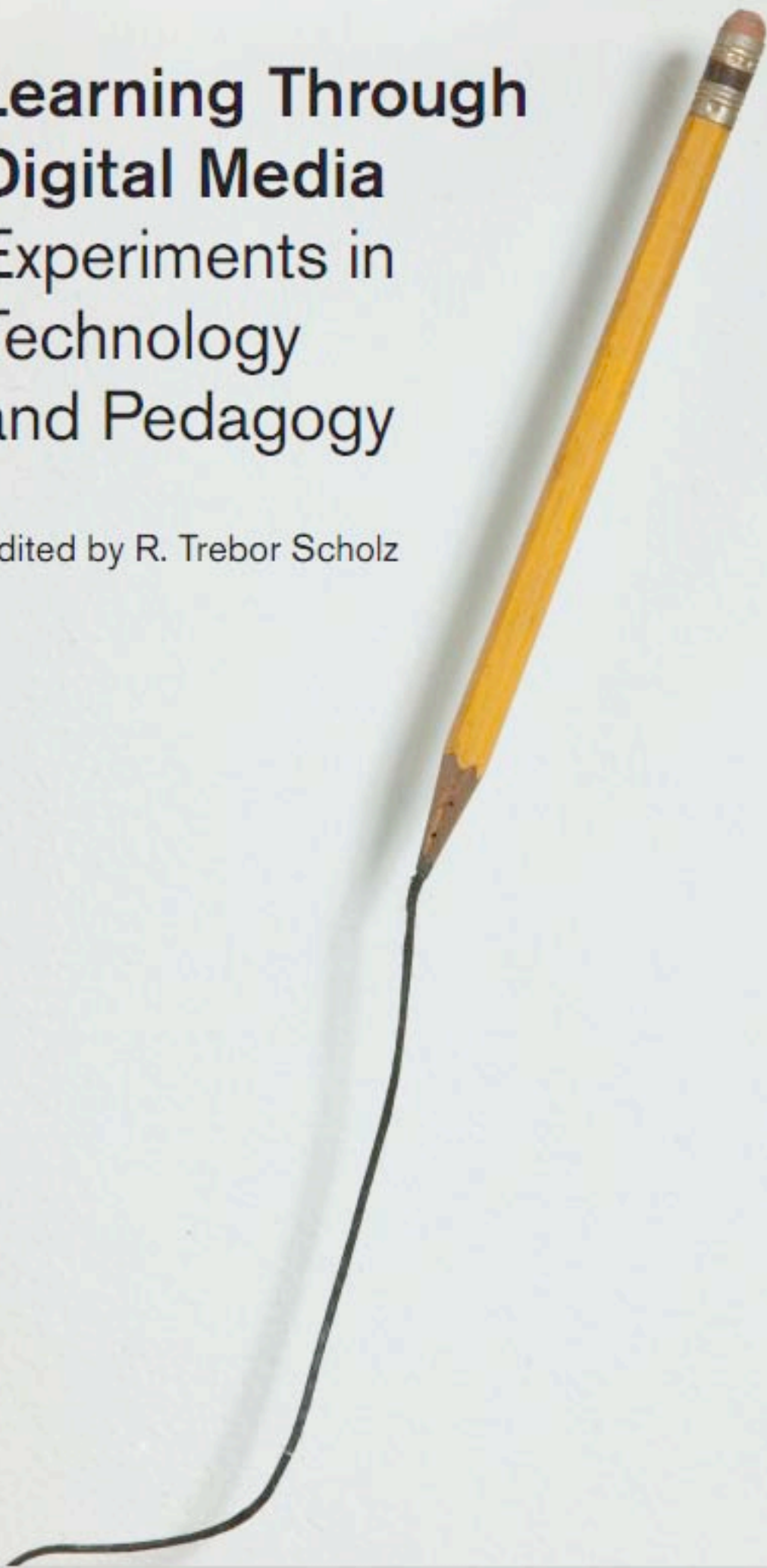
relation to which they remain significantly disadvantaged and powerless" (155–156). Teaching about and through Facebook demonstrates a method for creating a learning context that invites students to increase knowledge and critical thinking while building a love of learning based on connectivity, engagement, creativity, curiosity, and collaboration.

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About This Publication

This publication is the product of a collaboration that started in the fall of 2010 when a total of eighty New School faculty, librarians, students, and staff came together to think about teaching and learning with digital media. These conversations, leading up to the *MobilityShifts* Summit, inspired this collection of essays, which was rigorously peer-reviewed.

The Open Peer Review process took place on MediaCommons,¹ an all-electronic scholarly publishing network focused on the field of Media Studies developed in partnership with the Institute for the Future of the Book and the NYU Libraries. We received 155 comments by dozens of reviewers. The authors started the review process by reflecting on each other's texts, followed by invited scholars, and finally, an intensive social media campaign helped to solicit commentary from the public at large.

The New School is a leading institution when it comes to incorporating cross-disciplinary digital learning into the curriculum. It offered its first Media Studies degree program already in 1975. *Learning Through Digital Media* reaffirms this commitment to interdisciplinary innovation.

¹ See <<http://mediacommons.futureofthebook.org/mcpress>>.

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