

Approaching Social Capital Theory in Digital Literacy Curricula: Considerations for Secondary English and First-Year Composition Instructors

A Digital Respons-Ability White Paper
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ABSTRACT

This white paper examines the ways social capital theories (first appearing in the late 1980s from sociologists Pierre Bourdieu and James Coleman) might be applied to help instructors in secondary English and first-year composition courses develop a more nuanced and identity-oriented approach to digital literacy.

Keywords: digital literacy, media literacy, social capital, secondary English, first-year composition, FYC

INTRODUCTION

When assigning work in digital spaces, it is currently common for secondary English and first-year composition instructors to ask students to engage in social behaviors that would be generally acknowledged as awkward or inappropriate in non-digital spaces.

Consider how students might react to this assignment regarding their actions in a non-digital space:

First, find a social event to attend (perhaps it's someone's wedding, a house party, or a special dinner). Second, throughout the event, approach 4-5 groups of friends, acquaintances, strangers, or potential employers. Third, for each group you approach, briefly and loudly summarize this semester's most notable academic reading assignments.

Many educators would be instinctively disinclined from assigning students such a task, recognizing that it could have lasting social ramifications in a non-digital environment. It's clear that such an assignment might cause students to annoy others, weaken existing relationships, or develop an unfavorable reputation among potential social connections. However, it's routine for secondary English and first-year composition instructors to assign similar tasks in digital environments (Mina 273). Students may be asked to post commentary on their existing Facebook accounts, broadcasting the assigned information to everyone they've chosen to connect with. Or, students may be asked to create Twitter accounts, attaching their names to required tweets published in a public, worldwide forum.

Instructors who post judiciously to their own social accounts (knowing they're likely

observed by administrators, colleagues, and other social actors) may inadvertently overlook the fact that many students also have thoughtfully-developed online presences - and that the digital environment is a “real” environment resulting in lived social repercussions. The ongoing prevalence of such assignments reveals the need for further discussion around the significance of relationship-building and social capital in current digital literacy curricula.

SOCIAL CAPITAL THEORY & DIGITAL LITERACY

Many secondary English and first-year composition classes now include some element of digital literacy instruction. Often, these lessons focus on digital literacy from a preventative lens. Students are instructed in ways to analyze media in order to avoid propaganda, bias, and misinformation. They are taught to detect and avoid online scams and phishing expeditions. They are instructed on methods of creating digital texts, not always with their actual online audience in mind but with a practice audience (instructors and peers) examining assigned texts that now reside in a public or semi-public space with social actors. Missing from many discussions on digital literacy is the way the digital environment is used as a tool to negotiate relationships between groups of people (i.e. networks) and collect resources based on those relationships.

Developed by Pierre Bourdieu and James Coleman in the late 1980s, social capital theory examines the ways humans are able to acquire resources and amass power by developing a network of reciprocal relationships (Bourdieu; Coleman). This banked assemblage of resources and power can later be used to move towards an individual or collective goal (Colclough and Sitaraman 475). Sociologist Nan Lin defines social capital as “an investment and use of embedded resources in

social relations for expected returns. Social capital is conceptualized as (1) quantity and/or quality of resources that an actor (be it an individual or group or community) can access or use through (2) its location in a social network” (Lin 786). While social capital theory has broad interdisciplinary applications, it is often related to the study of economics, class, communication, and education.

Although social capital is also accumulated in non-digital spaces, the internet has made it more common for users to increase their social capital without face-to-face interaction, both in overt settings such as online social networks and in other digital spaces (many of which are increasingly “designed for social”). Common online behaviors such as sharing a post on social media, selecting a news outlet to frequent, or contributing to an online community are all acts that may contribute to or diminish an actor’s social capital. Consciously or otherwise, students find themselves in situations that ask them to make choices about what kind of relationships they want to build and with whom. These decisions result in their accumulation of social capital, and ultimately inform their ability to act (both online and off-line) towards their own individual and collective goals. By approaching digital literacy through the lens of social capital theory, secondary English and first-year composition students will be better prepared to analyze and act upon the authentic rhetorical situations they encounter in online environments.

ACTION THROUGH SOCIAL CAPITAL

Observed through the lens of social capital theory, creating TikTok videos, posting Instagram stories, or becoming active contributors to Reddit communities can be strategic moves intended to bank resources for future action. By building their social capital online, students engage in the development of

reciprocal relationships that amplify their ability to act within the social world. Their position in these networked relationships represents their future (banked) ability to access resources and power structures that can help them meet their goals at a later date. Social capital accumulated online may represent a small slice of an actor's overall social capital, but it can translate to off-line action (Rykov et al. 1). A student's ability to join a club, have their work considered for an art show, be invited to an end-of-the-semester party, or meet the decision-makers at their dream job may be determined, in part, by the social capital they are able to accrue both online and off-line.

Social capital can also determine an actor's ability to access social knowledge - the network-distributed information that is needed in order to take desired action. At the local level, for example, participation in online social networks may help an actor locate the information they need to take action as they move into adulthood, such as securing housing, locating nearby medical care, or gaining access to other city-level resources (Rykov et al. 2). Often, the most useful information is not easily available in a public format but, instead, can be acquired through developing reciprocal relationships with the right groups of people. Participating in online community groups, connecting with local leaders and civic organizations, and developing reciprocal relationships with networks of people holding similar goals can give young people access to the information needed to successfully transition into independence.

Similarly, several studies have demonstrated that access to social capital is a "key influence" on students' ability and decision to enroll in college (Hill et al. 317). While most studies of this kind focus on the social capital held by the families of high school students (generally with the parents as the central node of the network),

new research is finding that the networks developed by the students themselves may play a role in determining not only the likelihood of a student to enroll in college but also the selectiveness of the colleges the student applies to. This approach acknowledges the position students take as actors in relation to the development of their own social capital. Such research "recognizes the emerging independence of adolescents and conceptualizes them as agents in their own educational attainment processes" (Hill et al. 318). For young people who do not benefit from the advantages of economic and racial power structures, forming their own diverse social networks through schools, jobs, or community contacts can be a mechanism that helps them meet goals like college admittance (Briggs).

It's significant to note that some online behaviors may diminish an actor's social capital, thereby limiting their ability to act in the future. Consider the instructor's request for students to post academic reading summaries on their Facebook feed described at the beginning of this article. This action may have little to no effect on a student who has not already engaged in the creation of a robust social network. However, it may have deleterious consequences for a student who is actively engaged in creating social capital intended to be used towards personal goals, even if these consequences are relatively minor. For example, posts judged to be inauthentic or irrelevant to career and social connections may result in a student being unfollowed or unfriended. This may later limit the student's social reach, or ability to disseminate the content that they choose to create and share. The student may lose his ability to directly message a particular connection to ask for assistance or guidance. By demonstrating awareness of such social situations, instructors can be better prepared to design assignments that guide students to

analyze and evaluate the ways they use social capital to build the capacity for action in their own lives.

“FAKE NEWS” & SOCIAL CAPITAL

When teaching media literacy, first-year composition and high school English instructors often focus on the development of protective skills that help students identify and criticize the “fake news” they encounter in digital environments. This approach assumes that actors choose to engage with misleading online content due to an underdevelopment of literacy or a lack of critical thinking skills. However, when viewed through the lens of social capital theory, instructors may begin to see student engagement with fake news as a series of strategic choices intended to increase social capital.

The consumption of news is increasingly a social activity for younger internet users. In a 2018 study of 6,000 college students, 89% of respondents reported accessing their news from social media sources where misinformation and fake news generally goes unchecked (Head et al.). In a 2015 study, more than 60% of student respondents reported sharing misinformation online. Primary purposes for sharing such content included self-expression and socialization. Within this survey, students who shared misinformation gave low priority to the accuracy or authority of the information they chose to share (Chen et al. 583). Rather than assuming students desire to engage with accurate online content, it may make more sense to consider that students are often choosing to engage with content that is socially valuable regardless of its accuracy.

How does sharing misinformation online build social capital? One possibility is that social actors are given a greater platform when they share fake news. Content that is both negative (Hansen et al.) and novel (Vosoughi et al.) is

more likely to spread quickly on social media, giving the sharer the ability to be seen and acknowledged by a greater number of people. Additionally, research suggests that engaging with fake news may be a way to signal identity markers to people in the same (or an intended) social network: “people share stories based on affective or emotional appeal more than factual accuracy, with the goal of supporting their pre-existing beliefs and signaling their identity to like-minded others” (Leeder 2).

This situation is complicated by the fact that different actors in social spaces have different purposes for engaging with fake news. Misinformation that is designed for nefarious purposes (often by profiteering corporations or by hostile foreign powers) is often distributed on social media with more benign intentions: “while fake news is often *created* to destabilize society, it may be *shared* to enhance and maintain friendship” (Duffy et al.). Simply teaching students the digital literacy skills needed to identify and evaluate fake news may be insufficient to keep them from engaging with and sharing such content. Instead, students must develop a more nuanced understanding of the role social capital is playing in the distribution and reception of misinformation online. Some researchers suggest that instructors may be able to help shift student engagement with news to focus on a collective, rather than individual, use of social capital. Leeder suggests that:

Students should be encouraged to critically evaluate all types of online news sources, especially those found through social media. They should also be encouraged to reflect on their motivations for sharing news stories that they know are fake or untrustworthy and consider the consequences for society of the rapid spread of fake news stories through social media. (9)

Such an approach re-frames the conversation, asking students to view themselves as actors working towards the collective preservation of democracy. This big-picture perspective may present a social goal more nebulous than many students feel prepared to undertake. However, the discussion itself may help students develop a more accurate understanding of how and why fake news spreads online - and how their own engagement with online content makes them an actor in a larger narrative of societal progress.

THE DARK SIDE OF BUILDING SOCIAL CAPITAL ONLINE

While significant attention has been paid to the positive aspects of building social capital online, instructors may observe that online social capital is also used to accumulate the assets needed for young people to take damaging action within society. Social capital itself is a neutral concept, and the resources it banks may be used for constructive or destructive purposes (Briggs). Over time, networks can empower individuals to inflict harm on a scale that would have been impossible for a lone actor. Social sites like Reddit, 4chan, and 8kun harbor hate groups that have, in recent years, gained power in the off-line political and community sphere. The right-wing conspiracy group QAnon, for example, was able to amass significant power through a frenzied sharing of fake news on social sites. Through the bonds formed in the creation and sharing of this content, group members were able to leverage their social capital to gain support from some U.S. congressional candidates, draw substantial media coverage, and inspire violent action by fringe supporters (Seminar).

Digital literacy instruction may be improved by acknowledging that young people may personally benefit from building social capital even when it happens within networks that are harmful to society. Profiteering corporations,

street gangs, discriminatory clubs, criminal networks, and like-minded organizations benefit similarly from generating networks with strong social capital. On an individual level, participation in such groups can be a survival skill or coping mechanism. Young people who are not able to gain acceptance into more mainstream and widely-accepted social networks may be rewarded by engaging with these online social groups, despite their deleterious effects in society (Billett 848). When people are unable to get their needs met by other social groups, they may choose to rely on harmful or even criminal networks to cultivate the relationships needed to get ahead, or simply survive, in a competitive society.

The development of future media literacy curricula may benefit from further research into the malicious side of building social capital. In the meantime, it makes sense for instructors to work with students in thoroughly examining their constructive goals and the ways online social networks might help them be more productive in meeting such goals. Effective classroom discussions on digital literacy don't just protect students from malicious online groups, they help students reflect critically on the personal goals that may make participation in such groups appealing.

THE DIGITAL DIVIDE BECOMES A SOCIAL DIVIDE

In an increasingly networked world, a lack of access to the internet and the digital literacy skills needed to navigate it can have significant social consequences. The development and use of social capital appears to be playing a substantial, although often overlooked, role in the way digitally literate students engage in online spaces.

Unfortunately, many of the social divides that exist in off-line spaces are also common in these digital spaces. Sociologist Xavier de

Souza Briggs points out that social capital itself replicates many of the challenges to access found in larger society:

...Because it is stored in social relationships, social capital is organized, whether we like it or not, along the very fault lines that relationships, neighborhoods, and social participation often are in our world. Race and ethnicity, social class, gender, and creed are some of the most important.” (Briggs)

There is no easy answer for overcoming these divides. However, acknowledging the existence of social capital theories in online spaces and helping students develop the skills necessary to critically evaluate their own behavior as social actors can help them develop a more nuanced understanding of the digital world and gain a greater measure of power over their own online choices.

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