It's All Public to Me

Bill Torgerson

I’m in my office reading a paper by a student who is describing his use of Twitter when I come across these lines: “It bothers me when random people that I barely know like my statuses. This is exactly why my Twitter page is on private: the thought of people stalking my digital life creeps me out.” Reading that, I feel interested. The students and I have just passed the midway point of a semester where we’ve been investigating the notion of digital literacy. It’s an investigation I began by asking the students where they were online. Their answers included many places I’d heard of—Pinterest and Yelp—and many others I had not: World Star Hip Hop and Gaia.

My impulse to emphasize digital literacy came partially from what was right in front of me: that most of the reading and writing my students engage in happens in digital spaces. Left unchecked, many students in my class would at a minimum constantly peek at the screens of the cell phones they have upturned on their desks or tucked away on their laps. I’d asked all of my students to create Twitter accounts and assigned them regular course-related tweets. I invited students to opt out of this aspect of class, but no one chose to do that. Following our discussion of where we hang out online, we began reading from a collection of texts (some of them excerpts) that I’d placed on eReserve. These included Nicholas Carr’s The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains and the most frequently selected text, Henry Jenkins's
“Love Online.” Sometimes I think it’s romantic hopefulness that fuels most of the students’ habitual messaging.

I finished reading the paper before me and began to pack up for my first class of the day. While I regularly interact with people I have never heard of on Twitter, I understood the impulse for the student’s “creeps me out” observation. I’d felt similar sensations myself, but my time online had caused me to move past being surprised when I received a message from a stranger. Certainly there were still “creepy” messages, but those I just ignore or block. Was my own strategy effective or naive?

Walking to class, I thought about the midterm grades I’d just completed. One portion of the grades depended on setting up an ePortfolio. The system was new to us, and because many of the students had trouble with the interface and setup, I’d tweeted out a link to a portfolio I thought served as an example of good work. My tweet was almost immediately retweeted by a staff member of the company hired by the university to host the ePortfolios. When we write online, we leave a digital trace where connections can be followed from person to person. Would it be a problem that the link to the student’s ePortfolio had been tweeted to hundreds of followers, none of whom the student had ever heard of? In the case of this particular student whose link I’d tweeted, I doubted it. As a member of the university golf team, this student had already defined a fairly sophisticated understanding of what he wanted to publish to Twitter. I could, however, imagine different circumstances with other students.

There was another aspect of the midterm grades that had my attention. A student had missed a lot of classes and written to me about some health problems that had necessitated travel back to his hometown to see a physician. In figuring that student’s grade, I visited his Twitter homepage looking for class-related tweets. There weren’t any, but something else was clear: there’d been no trip home, and he’d been feeling well enough to do a lot of late-night tweeting related to parties. I felt as if I might be getting somewhere close to the neighborhood of “creepy” as I browsed that particular student’s posts.

Arriving at class, I headed for the computer, turned on the projector, and shined all of our class-related tweets onto the screen at the front of the room. I told the students the story of my reading their papers and, with permission, read the paragraph containing the phrase “creeps me out.” There were other students who echoed their unease about online interactions with strangers. I pointed out the retweet of the link to one of the student’s ePortfolios. The
student responded by saying, “Cool,” and seemed proud to have his work held up as exemplary. There was a high five from a fellow golfer.

To the student who’d written the phrase “creeps me out,” I asked about the possibility of reconceiving the way he understood Twitter. Perhaps messages from strangers are exactly what we should expect in that digital locale. One of the many uses for Twitter is as a place for strangers to come together and tweet around topics of interest, whether those interests are to express outrage at plans to continue with the running of the 2012 New York City Marathon or to post pictures of what one is going to have for dinner. I explained that I receive many “family emergency” emails per semester, and of course I know that some of these emergencies don’t exist. I reminded the class that they’d sent me links to their Twitter home pages. The students and I began to imagine all the potential audiences for the texts we publish via platforms such as email, Facebook, Twitter, and ePortfolios.

Given that the ePortfolios were new to the university, I told the students there were potentially a number of administrators regularly checking in on the ePortfolios to see how they were being used. We wondered about the number of employees who work for companies such as Facebook and Twitter. Yes, we could protect our Tweets or toggle the privacy settings to our ePortfolios, but just how many people might still have access to our information? We were all reminded (or came to see) that there are hundreds if not thousands of people who have access to our online passwords, Facebook messages, or what we might perceive as private emails. Perhaps I can be persuaded that the composition classroom isn’t the place to publish to Twitter or that ePortfolios present a significant threat to student privacy, but I do know this: we shouldn’t see any digital writing as private. When we compose in digital spaces, our writing is always potentially infinitely public.

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