I think that is the point of mistakes and the point of parents and the point of humanity. Dude. That’s the point of life!,” #SmartGirlzWorld, a student in a ninth-grade English class from an urban high school in New York, tweeted to one of her digital literature circle partners during one of their many ongoing conversations about Lois Lowry’s *The Giver*. This time #SmartGirlzWorld was responding to a master’s-level graduate student studying to obtain a literacy specialist degree. Her initial tweet, a comment followed by a question, to #SmartGirlzWorld had been in reference to the deficiencies within the protagonist’s community: “Experience is life’s greatest teacher. What experience does Js [Jonas’s] community lack?” #SmartGirlzWorld, in her excitement for communicating fresh ideas of understanding across an experimental platform with a new discussant, crafted a response that drew upon features of African American Language (e.g., repetition, cadence, and delivery) to build up to the point she made about life in general. This moment was one of clarity for #SmartGirlzWorld, an instance of sudden insight, a case of aesthetic reading (Rosenblatt 25). And yet, what was equally as powerful for us (a university professor in literacy education [Jevon] and a high school teacher in English language arts [Heidie]), as educators working with youth in urban learning contexts, were the affordances of what social networking sites could produce. After all, as we saw it, #SmartGirlzWorld had done a masterful job blending real-world experiences with narratives as mediated through literature, while giving us one of our first documented digital aha moments.

Like many 21st-century youth, students attending urban schools operate in a cultural milieu where social networking sites such as Facebook, Tumblr, and Instagram have become the lived environments where young people display information and ideas, establish camaraderie or feuds, and share conversations and perspectives from the imaginative to the mundane. These sites are increasingly becoming the (cyber)spaces that serve and reflect youth constructing, articulating, and participating in the formation of their social realities for and with other individuals. In essence, young people using social networking sites are involved in fundamental acts of teaching and learning. #SmartGirlzWorld’s text-based exchanges and experiences in a similar online environment offer a visionary glimpse into the way social networking sites such as Twitter could serve as a medium for providing robust literacy learning moments and powerful literature engagement.

In this article, we draw from recent classroom experiences with two sections of English language arts (ELA)—ninth-grade Honors English (ten students) and tenth-grade English (20 students)—to illustrate how youth attending an urban high school that serves predominately African Americans and Latinos/Latinas use Twitter to transform literacy learning and literature engagement. To be clear, our discussion of Twitter moves beyond treating it as a novel classroom addition designed simply to entertain students or as an attempt to pedagogize (Gutiérrez and Larson 69) youth activities by bringing them...
into the classroom environment as a superficial effort to implement culturally responsive teaching. Instead, we demonstrate that our incorporation of Twitter and its use by our students reflects a much needed shift in the conceptualization and delivery of ELA, one that more accurately displays the classroom’s “pluralistic, dynamic, hybrid, and fluid nature” (Kirkland 296) in tools, practices, motivation, engagement, and student identity development. By illustrating students' uses of emerging and established literacy activities through Twitter over an eight-week unit, youth in an urban high school are doing literacy differently to interact with literature in ELA and helping to remake both participation and interaction within the classroom environment. We see this as a continuation of and contribution to Valerie Kinloch’s call to “extend current conversations on the literate lives, academic achievements, and social networking systems of students of color in urban environments during and after school time” (2).

Twitter as Online Literacies Tools and Practices

As a literacy-based social networking site, Twitter represents one of a constellation of available online literacies that help to organize, facilitate, and disseminate digital texts in cyberspace (Alvermann 9). Twitter subscribers craft, share, read, and exchange text-based messages called tweets with followers, either synchronously or asynchronously, as a type of microblogging. These tweets cannot exceed a 140-character limit; therefore, the communicative activity on Twitter reflects a range of dominant and vernacular (Hamilton 180) writing conventions from institutionalized forms associated with formal writing to more self-generated forms such as modified words (e.g., cuz = because) or phrases (e.g., w/o u = without you); acronyms (e.g., smh = shaking my head); and letter, number, and symbol combinations (e.g., ne1 = anyone). During our project, students adopted hashtag monikers as pseudonyms (e.g., #SmartGirlzWorld, #thetruth, #Solar, etc.) and used a combination of institutionalized and vernacular writing forms. As students continued to access and manipulate these constitutive elements of Twitter, we viewed this as youth extending and expanding their online literacies development for present and future use.

Literacy researchers based in sociocultural-historical theories argue that in schooling spaces literacies function simultaneously as tools and practices (Nocon and Cole 19). As tools, literacies carry the potential to help reshape classroom environments and reorganize social arrangements among readers and with texts, but it is also through literacies that the reshaping and reorganizing can occur. It is both with literacies and through literacies that the goals of an English language arts classroom are accomplished. Yet, it is not only the acquisition of tools that aid in the rebuilding of classroom environments and the refashioning of social relationships, but also the continuous formation of emerging practices that involve the tools that help contribute to the creation of new forms of participation and interaction. As ELA teachers and teacher educators, we must attune ourselves to the ways literacy tools are situated in literacy practices (see Figure 1).

Our intention for incorporating Twitter in the classroom was borne out of an effort to reimagine the critical features of an English language arts classroom through the reading of literature. We were interested in cultivating creative tools and practices to inspire continual motivation, to ignite richer kinds of discussions, and to extend literature engagement across classroom community spaces and time. More practically, we wanted to offer high school students genuine opportunities to write authentically and frequently for real audiences beyond those found within the high school’s walls. Jevon’s

We wanted to offer high school students genuine opportunities to write authentically and frequently for real audiences beyond those found within the high school’s walls.
class of master's degree candidates in literacy became an ideal group to assist us in meeting our desired literacy-related ELA learning goals, since these emerging literacy specialists had enough background knowledge and skills to facilitate and sustain literary conversations. Thus, our community of readers was made up of high school students and master's-level literacy specialists.

In the early stages of our project, Twitter became a space for students to share their emerging understandings of Lois Lowry's The Giver, serving as a literacy tool that ushered in new literacy practices (Greenhow and Gleason 467) and created new literacy participation, interactions, and identities. During class time, students read the text and periodically paused after some interesting development or following the completion of a chapter, and then tweeted their interpretations as statements and/or questions to the community of readers using Windows-based tablets provided by the school. Initially, students waited until the next class session to read the responses from the community of readers, then replied with additional tweets. Here, students were creating online, ongoing discussions or tweet threads (Greenhow and Gleason 471). However, as the students collectively noted, this activity was too constraining, as they desired to engage in more digitally based conversations in situ. To accommodate the students' request, they were given full access to Twitter, tweeting their thoughts at any time to anyone using personal smartphones, hand-held devices, or computers after school hours. During school hours, though, students used the class tablets; personal electronic devices were restricted.

We soon noticed a new verve in the class as students participated in multiple Twitter conversations with multiple people, even revisiting past tweet threads to substantiate and shape current tweets. We also observed a number of students having Twitter discussions beyond the official hours of the school, which also included the weekends. When questioned in class about the many occasions where students tweeted between midnight and 5:00 a.m., #IN_TELLY_GENTS, a familiar user of Twitter, declared out loud, “Intelligence never sleeps!” He was correct, and his declaration highlighted for us how youth remained engaged in content-focused conversations well after the dismissal bell and signaled an increased level of excitement around doing literacy. This enthusiasm was not limited to students, however.

We also witnessed how the incorporation of Twitter changed the structure of instruction and practices of classroom. To begin instruction, Heidie regularly spotlighted “Tweets of the Day”: student-generated tweets or tweet threads posted at the front of the classroom that featured insightful discussions or analyses of The Giver. She then reviewed the day's learning objectives and class-related assignments that were posted on a centrally located whiteboard, spending a few moments to clarify Twitter-mediated learning goals. Then, a seven- to ten-minute mini-lecture followed, oftentimes initiated by or framed around students’ individual tweets or tweet threads. Doing this provided students with the opportunity to view their contribution to a lived curriculum. The remaining class time saw students participating in three distinct reading groups (see Figure 2) to accomplish the reading, engage in tweeting, and complete outlined assignments. It must be noted that students were not assigned to reading groups, but were encouraged to move between them depending on the kinds of learning experiences or forms of assistance students wanted.

As a result of these new instructional structures and practices, students were more excited to come to class, often arriving before the bell rang to quickly review any unread tweets. Furthermore, students continued to tweet regularly in the hopes of having their tweets acknowledged and referenced in class. These simple acts of recognition and celebration created a sense of validation in the students as their thoughts, opinions, and perspectives were

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<th>FIGURE 2. In-Class Reading Groups and Descriptions</th>
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treated as official classroom knowledge. Moreover, because there was an increase in student participation and interaction in and outside of the classroom, daily lessons were structured in ways that afforded students multiple and frequent opportunities for independent learning. Students appreciated this self-sufficient ethos, as they moved at their own pace and were responsible for their own learning. Last, because students witnessed their tweets or tweet threads incorporated into the instruction and curriculum of the class, there was a more meaningful investment in learning. As displayed in this classroom, the use of Twitter generated creative literacy tools and practices that helped to reorganize the students’ participation and interaction in an English language arts classroom, while also affecting the teacher’s delivery of instruction.

**Twitter Mediates Literature Engagement and Motivation**

We started our project by considering how to encourage our high school students to read a dystopian novel such as *The Giver*. Our consideration was neither rhetorical nor flippant because pulsating at its core was the following question: Why should youth in an urban high school care about a post-apocalyptic piece of literature that seems disconnected from their lives? Our core question was a pragmatic one, the kind that all English language arts teachers must ask as they contemplate literature for youth to read. For us, the answer needed to serve both personal and academic learning goals, so that students could see the value in spending time reading. To answer the personal learning goal, we looked to the work of Carol D. Lee, who once wrote, “Literature is essentially narratives of personal experiences” (47). We wanted our youth to locate and connect their lived experiences to the emerging and evolving narrative themes within the text. While we fully recognize that our students will not experience a world completely similar to that found in *The Giver*, the more enduring themes present in the novel such as choice, deception, nostalgia, responsibility, and suffering will be recurrent throughout the lives of our young people. We saw achieving the academic goal related in that by identifying the themes using textual evidence and discussing them in sustained and frequent conversations through Twitter, our students were engaged in activities that met many of the New York State’s Common Core Learning Standards (NYS CCLS) for English Language Arts and Literacy standards (see Figure 3). While Twitter provided an online,
anytime platform for the revelation, discussion, and development of these personal and academic themes, the social networking site also served as a tool for motivation.

Literacy and English language arts educators know that to engage youth in reading, they must be motivated (Bull 72). Often, this motivation is framed in terms of the kinds of texts made available to students and the ability for them to select readings (Lapp and Fisher 561). We certainly agree; however, experience tells us that over a four-year high school ELA curriculum, students will encounter books in which they will have little to no interest engaging, but are nonetheless required reading. It is here we argue that motivation could be stimulated using creative tools and practices that organize and facilitate literature engagement. Our students shared with us that they were frequently encouraged by the online conversations to engage and re-engage texts through questions and perspectives generated by the community of readers, as articulated by #Epic: “What I liked most was the kind of critical thinking it [Twitter] forced us to have. It made me think more about the book.” #bosslady, another student, explained in greater detail, “Reading the tweets of others made you more interested in the story and made you want to learn more about the story. When they [the literacy specialists] would ask me a question, I had to go back and reread the part they were talkin’ about.” When asked if she enjoyed going back into the text to re-read passages, #bosslady assuredly and simply said, “Yeah.”

Part of the appeal of rereading the text had to do with confirming, reconfirming, and/or disconfirming questions, statements, perspectives, and presages. This emergent practice signaled a different level of engagement with *The Giver*, as students used tweets as conversational starters. It became a common classroom practice for students to display a type of multimodal dexterity, moving with ease between Twitter, *The Giver*, in-class discussions, and journal writing (see Figure 4).

Students also displayed their literature engagement by maintaining ongoing conversational exchanges, simultaneously, with multiple discusants. For instance, #SmartGirlzWorld communicated with at least nine other individuals within our community of readers. At first, we were concerned that students sustaining dialogues with so many people would increase the odds of off-topic, nonacademic discussions; however, as many students, including #SmartGirlzWorld, noted, these conversations were more academic-related, with additional exposure to the thinking and perspectives of others, even leading to the rereading of certain book passages. This practice served students well in preparation for their assessment, as they revisited the book in conjunction with the tweets or tweet threads to gain deeper and robust insights about the text. In fact, we noted through formative assessments that those students who actively and regularly participated on Twitter improved their writing and vocabulary usage, and on summative assessments during our third quarter benchmark, we found overall improvement on constructed and extended responses from the same students. We are confident that activities and practices such as these will contribute meaningfully to students’ preparation for the state’s Regents Examination during their junior year.

**Creative Literacies + Sustained Literature Engagement = Developing Academic Identities**

A significant unanticipated outcome that emerged from our instructional efforts was the developing academic identities students embodied as mediated through Twitter. As discussed earlier, students created hashtag monikers as pseudonyms while participating and interacting online. These hashtag monikers allowed students to control their identities,
either by signifying some aspect of present character traits (e.g., #QuietOne) or re-creating conceptions of individual selves (e.g., #thetruth). Students described to us that these were fun ways to reinvent themselves, often embodying identities that ran counter to how others in the school may have viewed them (Alvermann 12). In addition, these hashtag monikers presented a level of anonymity, as many students decided not to reveal their Twitter identities to each other. By remaining anonymous, students had personal, yet public, extensive, and meaningful conversations with each other, sometimes with classmates who were not part of their inner circle of friends. For some students, this digital learning context allowed them to take academic risks whether it was sharing an idea to see what others thought or experimenting with language. As an example, we noted that #IN_TELLY_GENTS used Twitter to practice his academic writing skills by integrating challenging vocabulary words into his tweet exchanges.

Beyond the hashtag monikers, students found that their Twitter conversations encouraged a different type of thinking about student academic identity. This rethinking of the self was particularly the case when students interacted with the master’s-level literacy specialists. Generally, our students enjoyed the content of these discussions. #SmartGirlzWorld explained that “Being able to work with graduate students made me feel like a bit more professional, like we were being taken seriously, like young adults and not high school students.” #Swerve, another student, expanded on her classmate’s comment:

Its like I could agree that all of us sitting here are on another level of vocabulary, and sometimes like we could be talking to other people, and sometimes they don’t understand what we are saying. For us to be able to like talk to somebody who’s probably at a higher level of vocabulary and understand what we are talking about was just nice to be able to do, to have a conversation with somebody who understands what we are saying.

#Swerve’s comments captured the general feeling of the students, and perhaps just as important, illustrated how many young people desire opportunities to be academically and intellectually challenged during school-related activities.

As an extension of their academic identity, voice played a central role in our project. Many students felt emboldened to use Twitter to have conversations with our community of readers, as it afforded students another form of participation in which their expertise and understanding of *The Giver* could be displayed. This kind of participation structure worked well in the service of those students who did not regularly speak out in class. #Solar was such a student. During traditional classroom interactions, #Solar was very reserved; yet, her contributions on Twitter were recurrent and insightful. She regularly posted questions on Twitter “to see how everyone would react.” Eventually, however, she began receiving more questions and responding to them more frequently because her interpretations of the text often connected to the lived experiences of students. Being given an alternative way to participate in classrooms was critical to students like #Solar who used these creative literacy tools and practices to demonstrate mastery of literature.

**Literacy and Literature Reimagined**

Arnold Weinstein, noted American poet and playwright, once wrote that “Literature offers us access to and a way to share the entire range of human feeling over the ages. This is a gift like no other” (xx). His assessment is a common one and a variation to the adage that literature provides us access to the human condition. While we agree, we want to add a caveat: Although reading literature may provide us with occasions to explore the human condition, let us not forget that the tools and practices used to access that information are also part of the human condition and tell us just as much about how we learn along with what we learn.

Reimagining the social organization of literacy learning and instruction are essential features for producing transformative classroom environments. With the continuing presence and growth of Twitter, as well as other forms of social networking sites that operate within the cultural milieu of urban educational contexts, English language arts and literacy educators are poised to bring forth something different, something new, something meaningful that has the capacity to foster “authentic thinking, thinking that is concerned about reality . . .
but only in communication” (Freire 77; italics in original). We must be encouraged to embrace and explore the possibilities for connecting our youth with and through these online literacy tools and practices to the range of available literature within ELA. With some success, we may be moving into uncharted areas that might spark and sustain interests in new and exciting ways. If mistakes are made along the way, so be it, as we should be emboldened to treat them as opportunities for growth. After all, as #SmartGirlzWorld once tweeted: “I think that is the point of mistakes . . . . Dude. That’s the point of life!”

Note
1. All students have selected hashtag moniker pseudonyms to replace original hashtag monikers.

Works Cited


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READWRI'TE THINK CONNECTION

In the ReadWriteThink.org lesson plan “Using Microblogging and Social Networking to Explore Characterization and Style,” students use microblogging and social networking sites to trace the development of characters and examine writing style while reading a novel of manners such as Jane Austen’s Emma. By assuming the persona of a literary character on the class Ning and sending a set number of tweets (or status updates), students explore changes undertaken by dynamic characters, the effect of plot developments on individual characters, and the nuanced social interactions among characters in Emma. They also discover elements of authorial writing style through imitation and transposition. This lesson can be scaled from an individual class session (microblogging only) to an ongoing companion to a novel. http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/using-microblogging-social-networking-1171.html