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Literacy and Social Media: Young Adult Readers in Goodreads Online Communities

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Abstract

Goodreads elevates the user to a level of content producer, which increases student engagement with literature. As all the members within the group are simultaneously promoted in status and begin developing relationships, they create trust and are more willing to take book recommendations from each other, tying in the readers' advisory component of the site. As a result, Goodreads users are being encouraged to read novels recommended by their peers and are given autonomy to choose based off trusted recommendations. The combination of autonomy and connection that Goodreads offers creates not only a more culturally relevant classroom, but one filled with students more likely to see being a reader as part of their identity significant.

Background

As part of the techEQUITY program, Santa Barbara Unified School District has distributed iPads to all students in grades 4th through 12th over the past two years. As a tutor in AVID classrooms, I have watched students transition to participating in a more intensive digital learning experience. I have noticed students often lack interest in their assigned reading or English classes and are hesitant to participate in class discussions, while consistently turning to social media apps for entertainment and participating in online discourse in moments of free time. As a result, I began to wonder if a platform exists that combines social media and literacy, which led me to Goodreads. Goodreads, a social media platform, allows users to build an online bookshelf, participate in larger discussions via community groups, and message other users to build online connections. My research analyzed social groups on the site to track styles of communication that motivate users to read within a community of other readers. The goal is to accumulate guidance for secondary school educators to better engage their students within the humanities.

Literature Review

Students as Content Producers

Historically, students have displayed their knowledge of literature to an audience of one, their teacher, in the form of a book report or an essay. However, with the rise of technology in classrooms, students' work can now contribute to a larger public sphere online, elevating them to the role of content producers. In the article "'Words with Friends': Socially Networked Reading on 'Goodreads,'" Lisa Nakamura examines the user relationship to Goodreads, comparing it to online shopping and other popular social networking sites. Goodreads' familiar layout has similar features to Facebook and Twitter with an inbox, notifications, and ability to post status updates and comments. Hearing the ping of notifications "provides the psychic payoff of shopping without the cost" and building a public bookshelf contributes to an "egocentric network of public reading performance" (Nakamura, 2013, p.40). The content production and performance aspect of Goodreads provokes lively conversation among users about novels, a valuable element of processing literature that is lost in the traditional book report model. With every book a user reads and discusses, their status as a respected book reviewer is promoted. The motivating factor to gain this status is contributing to a community discussion, rather than attaining a grade.

According to Peter DePietro, the contribution element is a key component in engaging students. In "Social Media and Collaborative Learning" he states:

Social media are all about connecting individuals to communities of people who have elected to become part of that network, because these individuals want to engage as much as possible and as often as possible with that network. The quality of the engagement does not seem to matter as much as the amount of engagement, which for avid users of social media, is a lot. (DePietro, 2013, p. 47)

Social media engages students within the classroom, and this engagement does not come from the quality, but the quantity of content. This is evident within these Goodreads communities as often the discussion does not consist of deep, long comments back and forth on the literature, but rather brief casual conversation. In the article "Introduction Social Media as a Component of Reading Courses," Allison Bremer et al. details the implementation of Goodreads as a social media platform used within a college level writing class as a method to promote casual writing practice (Bremer et al., 2015, p. 56- 63). The professor notes how the class set up their Goodreads accounts and joined the private class group together, mentioning student relief at the realization that only their classmates would see their comments. The instructor explains that at the beginning they posted questions to spark discussion, but over time students became more comfortable within the group and started sharing on their own. Some students enjoyed the private group so much, they joined public communities to meet other readers, and continued connecting on the site after the course concluded. These are markers for successful integration of the site into the curriculum.

However, in order to garner this participation, social media must be integrated with a critical and ethical understanding of technology's role in the classroom. In the late 1990s, Vanessa Domine published the article "'Doing Technology' in the Classroom: Media Literacy as Critical Pedagogy," and although it is an older case study relative to today's rate of technological innovation, its exploration of the ethics behind integrating technology into the classroom remains relevant today. It makes the point that:

an educational climate of knowledge acquisition, technological proficiency, and efficiency overshadows and even undermines the critical, political, and ethical understandings essential for thriving as adults in a social and political democracy as well as global community. (Domine, 2007, p. 132)

In order to protect the “microcosm of democracy” that social media learning communities can be, educators must have a critical and comprehensive commitment to technology that views it as a tool to support learning rather than vice versa (Domine, 2007, p. 132). Domine advocates for the development of media literacy within classrooms under an “interdisciplinary framework” because it strengthens students’ ability to apply information with deeper critical awareness (Domine, 2007, p. 134). Just as technology prompts teachers to be aware that “the medium of exchange in which education is conducted—language— can never be neutral,” it pushes students to grow in their awareness of “the conditions surrounding their own subjectivity as well as the subjectivity of others” (Bruner, 1986, p. 121-122; Domine, 2007, p. 138). If these aspects of Domine’s critical pedagogy around media and literacy are present in the integration of Goodreads into classrooms, students can have more freedom to express their opinions to a larger audience and experience contributing to a public sphere.

Autonomy

In a typical English class, students are assigned literature to read that is chosen by their teacher and the entire class reads the same set of books. In this model, students are introduced to a narrow reading selection as “academic,” and if they do not develop an appreciation for those genres, can develop the mindset that reading is not their forte. For any given student, it could just take one book for them to change that mindset, but if they are only assigned a limited selection, the odds that one book that incites enjoyment landing in the right student’s hands seems unlikely. As a result, students attempt and give up on yet another book that does not provoke interest and turn to sites like Sparknotes to give them enough of an understanding of the novel to get by in their class. Imagine if in that moment students had the option to turn to Goodreads to find another book better suited to their tastes. Rather than settling for a superficial understanding of a book they do not enjoy, students could opt to have a deeper knowledge of a book of their choosing.

Margaret Mackey’s article “Learning to Choose: The Hidden Art of the Enthusiastic Reader,” supports the significance of autonomy within English classes, giving students an opportunity to choose the books they want to read. Mackey further problematizes the notion that reading extended fiction is the only genre for academic readers. After establishing that genre is not an indicator of ‘successful’ reading, Mackey claims that selection proficiency is what matters: “often...poor or non-readers are in fact simply poor choosers of reading material, a very different concern” (Mackey, 2014, p. 526). With Goodreads’s review and rating features, users can easily de-

velop the skills to choose the best fit for them, taking the pressure off of educators to select literature that will create lifelong readers. Mackey argues for autonomy not for the sake of a 'successful' class, but to

...support the ongoing significance of [reading as a] cultural act, if we want to sustain the novel, the biography, the history, the complex scientific or philosophical discussion, the play, the collection of poetry— if we want to keep readers reading as one significant part of our educational mission- then we need to be very clear that the importance of selection is still paramount. (Mackey, 2014, p. 523)

If the larger aim of English courses is to produce global citizens who can read news articles, complex scientific journals, or thought-provoking novels and contribute to public discourse in an educated and impactful way, then students must first acknowledge themselves as readers and be able to choose literature of their own accord. Following the acknowledgement of Mackey's claim that reading is a "cultural act," educators must then recognize that global citizens should not be assigned reading material but should be encouraged to choose for themselves. It is imperative that this element of autonomy is introduced and developed within educational settings early on.

Following advocacy for autonomous reading selection in classrooms via social media, one must address concerns of implementation. The article, "If Not Us, Who? Social Media Policy and the iSchool Classroom," addresses concerns from both students and educators "that current [social media] use was not well integrated into their coursework" (Nathan et. al., 2014, p. 123). Acknowledging the concerns raised about the constraints of technology in educational contexts, including accessibility and implementing it in support of learning, Lisa Nathan et. al advocates for an "adaptive design" regarding social media policy. By creating policy in the form of living documents that do "not to stifle innovation and learning," according to Nathan et al., educators can be free to experiment with giving students autonomy on social media platforms.

Despite concerns expressed by participants in Nathan et al.'s study, "the majority of students believed that learning 'about' and 'with' social media tools should be an essential part of the education they receive" (Nathan et al., 2014, p. 123). Although concerns about implementation is valid, the benefits of autonomous social media use in educational contexts are longstanding. In 2005, Ulises Mejias wrote an article about experimenting with then referred to as "social software" use in his graduate course at Teachers College, Columbia University. Mejias found student engagement in

“learning to learn by having them assume some of the responsibility for integrating and maintaining the social software systems that allow learning to happen” (Mejias, 2006, p. 1). Mejias reports that by giving students a sense of control over pursuing their individual research interests resulted in diversity, which enhanced the learning experience for all members of the course. Giving students autonomy in choosing their reading material both benefits the individual student and the larger group because it cultivates authentic interest in reading that translates to a more engaged, student-led classroom.

Readers' Advisory Component

If the secondary school educator were to shift from assigning books to teaching students how to choose their own reading material, the question of what specialists call “readers' advisory” [RA] would be an invaluable component within that decision-making process. For decades, readers' advisory, referred to as RA, was a term reserved for librarians who aimed to be able to recommend the perfect book to any patron. Now, as sites like Goodreads are on the rise, online reviewers and ratings have revolutionized the process of advising.

In “Finding Good Reads on Goodreads: Readers Take RA into Their Own Hands,” Yesha Naik and Barry Trott delve into the relational aspect of Goodreads' readers' advisory, specifically from the perspective of a librarian. They emphasize how the “trust relationship” and the “real life” friendships Goodreads users seem to develop allows for more willingness to read recommended books. Oftentimes, those recommendations take the form of “organic, natural, and sometimes messy online discussions and comments” (Naik & Trott, 2012, p. 320). In the study, the researchers noted how Goodreads users intuitively used RA strategies such as incorporating positive and negative appeal terms to promote and discourage reading specific books. The appeal terms used and flow of discussion differed between threads, which Naik and Trott attribute to differences in the book genres. The difference in how readers communicate with each other depending on the book being reviewed is a testament to how individualized social media can make the RA experience.

According to John Wesley White and Holly Hungerford-Kresser in “Character Journaling Through Social Networks,” the RA component of social media use can engage students in a “culturally relevant” way. The authors argue that not integrating technology would “hinder educators' ability to teach appropriate uses of the technology, erase what could be a useful tool for a classroom-home curriculum from the things that most interest our students” (White, 2014, p. 642). Allowing users to bring their funds of

knowledge into a multimedia-collaborative space will enable them to “negotiate and create new meanings” of the text while strengthening their “adolescent identity via social connectedness” (Sweeny, 2010, p. 121). One of the successful aspects of this research project is how “participants/readers were responsible not just to their teacher but to each other” (White, 2014, p. 649). Rather than the teacher being the only recipient of student work (often for the sole purpose of grading), social media sparks cooperative learning in that users often feel obligation to their peers to contribute to the discourse.

In part, using social media in the classroom is culturally relevant because the open invitation to participate in RA transforms the users into “cultural curators,” as stated in Anna Kiernan’s “Future-book Critics and Cultural Curators in a Socially Networked Age.” Kiernan quotes Mark Fidelman, a social media marketer, asserting that “‘there are no ‘professional’ critics that matter anymore. In our new social world, the crowd must decide’” (Kiernan, 2017, p. 117).

Although there can be controversy in handing such power over to ‘the crowd,’ in this shift of power to the students, significant aspects of popular culture are being reclaimed from the hands of the elite. By allowing entire classrooms to participate in critiquing literature on social media platforms, educators are simultaneously facilitating the reclamation of the public sphere by young people of color, women, members of lower classes, and other marginalized groups.

Methods

Selection of Community Groups

The communities that I researched were the YA Book Club with 3,144 members, the YA Buddy Readers’ Corner with 11,709 members, and the Perustopia Book Club with 19,089 members. YA Book Club’s biography states “We will be discussing books, and reading books together, and we’ll just get to have fun reading,” emphasizing reading as an engaging group activity. YA Buddy Readers’ Corner focuses more on creating space that generates “honest feedback” after reading books with a buddy. Perustopia Book Club emphasizes blogging and has links to both the moderators YouTube channels so members can watch videos about various books and topics as a supplement to the discussion boards.

Features of the Site

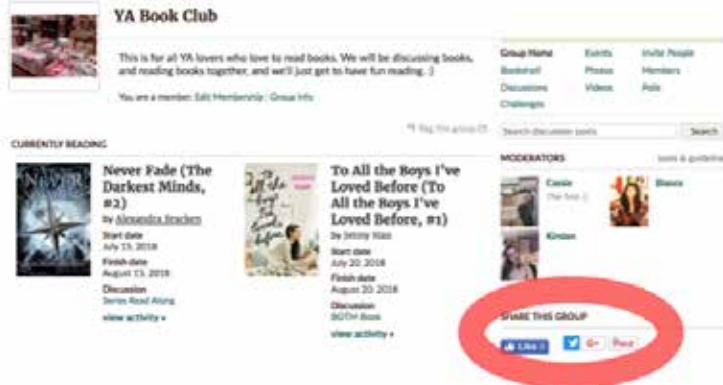
On the banner across the top of the site, there is a Community Tab (image below) with a dropdown menu containing a variety of options to participate in a group. The first section on the menu is "Groups," which can be public or private, and can be dedicated to any topic, genre, etc.



On the top right corner of the screen, users receive notifications from friend requests, discussion boards, the general site, and a message inbox.



On the bottom right of the screen, each group is linked to Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, and Google Plus. By associating with these other big-name social media platforms, Goodreads is presenting itself as a social media form as well. The site mimics these other platforms by having cover photos, profile pictures, number of views visible, etc.



To the right of the community group's short description and avatar, the specific features of community groups are listed as detailed below:

Home	• Mission statement and highlights current read
Bookshelf	• Sorts read, currently reading, and to read
Discussions	• Discussion boards for conversation
Challenges	• Users compete in reading challenges
Events	• Range from author appearances to book swaps
Photos	• Often for profile picture
Videos	• Often for movie trailers inspired by a book
Invite	• Allows users to invite others
Members	• Shows member name, avatar, and current read
Polls	• Allows user to poll their peers

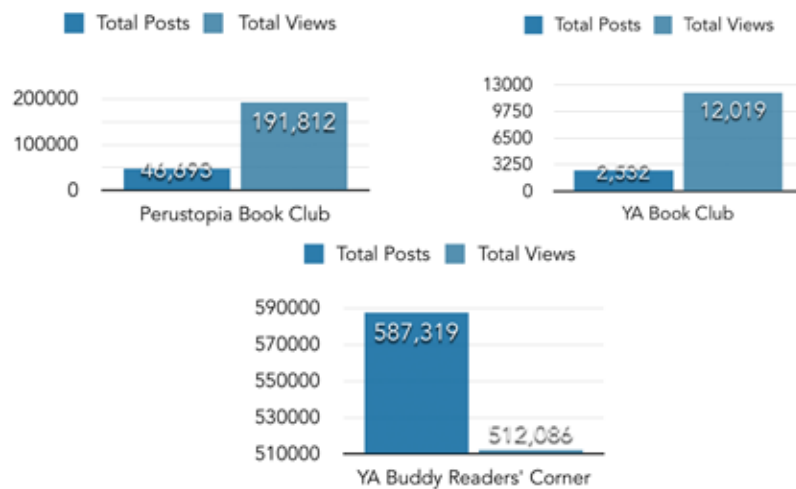
Results

Total Views to Total Posts

In "Social Media and Collaborative Learning," Peter DePietro discusses the quantity of content being produced as a unique factor

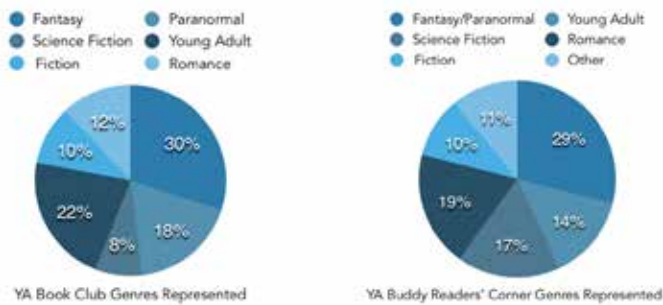
to social media. The article points out that social media platforms are meant to create connection, and typically, for users, the emphasis is on the quantity produced over the quality. The result of this focus on quantity is the “organic, natural, and sometimes messy” form of conversation that Naik and Trott discuss in “Finding Good Reads on Goodreads: Readers Take RA into Their Own Hands” (Naik & Trott, 2012, p. 320).

To measure Goodreads’s quantity of interactions, I created a spreadsheet recording the topic, starting user, number of posts, number of views, and date of last activity of all the discussion boards within each community group. Comparing the number of posts to the number of views, I noticed that Perustopia Book Club and YA Book Club only averaged 4.12 and 4.75 views per post. Interestingly enough, in YA Buddy Readers’ Corner, the views per post was .87 meaning that not all users’ posts were being viewed. While other social media platforms, like Instagram, are far more centered around getting a good engagement ratio, meaning the proportion of comments, views, and likesto number of followers, these Goodreads community users seem more focused on contributing to a larger discussion than receiving validation from engagement via a large number of likes, comments, and views.



Diversity in Genres and Mediums

The users in Goodreads community groups demonstrate their autonomy within the variety of book genres they explore and mediums through which they analyze literature. The YA Buddy Readers’ Corner has a bookshelf of 1,401 books and showed the most diversity in genres represented in a sample of 100 of the most recently read books. Below is a pie chart to illustrate the breakdown of book genres represented within the sample.



As seen in the pie chart above, users in the YA Buddy Readers' Corner are reading a mix of fantasy, science fiction, general young adult, romance, and fiction novels. Their freedom to choose is evident in the diversity of genres explored. As I scrolled down the bookshelf, I saw that it is not uncommon for a user to branch out to one genre, series, or author and then continue to read one or two more along the same thread. The users' experimentation is shown in the "Other" category, which is made up of randomly placed Italian, thriller, or even children's books in a new topic of interest. As stated in Mejias' article, a sense of control over learning results in diversity, which enriches the educational experience for the larger group.

In the YA Book Club community, the sample size of books from the group's bookshelf was 50 due to its smaller collection. The shelf displaced a similar breakdown of genres to the YA Buddy Readers' Corner as illustrated above.

In the Perustopia Book Club, the two starting users made the channel to supplement their YouTube channels. Combined, their YouTube channels have 640,298 subscribers and 69,910,908 page views. While the bookshelf does not seem to be updated by users, the discussion boards and number of views per video signify engagement from the Perustopia group. The two videos with the most views from each channel are "5 Books That Will Blow Your Mind" at over 757,000 views and "My Favorite Fantasy Books" at over 303,000 views. Interesting to note, the second most watched video on one account is "How to Get Instagram Followers," showing that these groups are discussing and interacting across social media platforms. This is supported by different discussion boards across groups dedicated to sharing usernames on other social media platforms to connect. In future studies, it would be interest-

ing to further investigate successful aspects of Goodreads pages that integrate other social media platforms and how that could be utilized in the classroom.

Types of Discussion

The conversations on review centered discussion boards are casual, and relatable to young users. Within dialogue, commonly used abbreviations are "LOL," meaning "Laugh Out Loud," and "OTP," meaning "One True Pairing" or a fictional couple a user loves together. Additionally, there are many exclamation marks and smiley faces indicating excitement about different books or responses from other users on the thread. In one thread about *The Fault in Our Stars*, a user replied "waaaaaaaah, I love TFIOS!" The elongated "waah" noise brings a sound to mind, as if you can hear the user's own voice, instead of just reading the words. After another user uploaded four books in one post, another user responded "Four books?!?! Really?? How do you do that?!?! lol!!" The use of excessive punctuation and abbreviations, like LOL, makes the receiver imagine a sound or physical cues indicating interest that makes the interaction feel more real and personal. All of the question marks and exclamation points after "How do you do that" indicate that the user is genuinely curious and really wants to know. As a result, a whole conversation began about staying up late to read and not getting enough sleep. From the springboard of a simple book review, the users have better insight into the everyday aspects of each other's lives, down to their sleep schedule.

As they do so, they become more aware of each other and the various interests represented in the community group within their reviews. For example, in a review, a user might suggest a book to another user based on that user's interests, even if they did not personally like the book. Similarly, users might say "fairies were a bit much for me! I gave it 3 stars. If fairies are your thing, I'd recommend it." These sorts of reviews show a sense of group awareness that develops in these users who are reading with other perspectives or opinions in mind, creating a more open reader. If a reader is not just reading for their own tastes, then they could be more likely to finish a book that they did not immediately take pleasure in.

Limitations

This research is meant to explore the benefits of using social media in secondary school English classrooms as a means to promote literary engagement, which is dependent on students having access to technology. Ideally, implementation of Goodreads as a classroom resource would take place in schools that offer students individual iPads, but it could also take place in classes with access

to a computer lab. Another limitation to consider is the types of users naturally attracted to using Goodreads. In this study, I looked at pre-existing Young Adult community groups. After studying usernames and pronouns used, it seems to be predominantly female users, which is something to note in co-ed classrooms. Lastly, social media is a relatively new phenomena, so it is difficult to predict the long-term effects of bringing it into the classroom.

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About the Author

Emma is a third year English major with minors in Education and Applied Psychology. Outside of class, Emma enjoys working with students at Goleta Valley Junior High, Dos Pueblos High School, and Girls Inc. After UCSB, she plans to pursue graduate programs in education policy.

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