Each time users log into their social networking accounts, they are invited to search for the trending topics (“See what’s happening right now!” on Twitter) or give a status update to friends (“Write something,” on Facebook). These prompts highlight some of the features of literacies in a digital age—immediacy, community, interactivity, and transparency.

On our Twitter accounts, we can publish links to the latest resources, conferences, papers, or websites for a network of “followers.” We can also use this popular Web 2.0 messaging service as a connection to breaking news as it streams across the Web. We can use our Facebook “wall” to publish details of our day-to-day minutiae, establishing an online identity for our ever-expanding, multitiered connections with relatives, friends, teachers, and other colleagues. These microblogging practices serve the purpose of maintaining solidarity with groups of people with whom we have an affinity.

Microblogging can play a powerful role in supporting the professional and personal growth of teachers in supportive online communities. However, concerns about online security have inhibited many educators from using popular microblogging platforms in their school or university classrooms. In our local state education department (Queensland, Australia), in-school student access to Facebook and Twitter is prohibited, though teacher access may be requested.

It is beyond the scope of this article to debate issues of censorship, access, and Internet safety in the context of microblogging. Rather, we demonstrate how meaningful contexts for literacy practice can be created through secure and free microblogging platforms designed for educational communities. These specialist educator networks enable students and teachers to collaborate in closed online environments. Designed for teachers and students, these microblogging services often provide a host of other useful tools for teachers to manage classes, display calendars, or share and store files. They also allow educators to post frequently updated information to a public timeline and RSS (Really Simple Syndication) feed to publish frequently updated works.
Web 2.0 practices that have been the focus of studies include relay writing (Yi, 2008), blogging (Davies & Merchant, 2009), threaded discussion (Grisham & Wolsey, 2006), and wikis (Wheeler & Wheeber, 2009).

While there is a growing corpus of research in the New Literacy Studies that focuses on specific digital contexts of literacy practice (for a comprehensive review, see Mills, 2010a), microblogging in educational settings has not yet been widely addressed. Microblogging platforms designed for use by students and teachers in restricted online networks have only recently become available. For example, EDMODO—the service used in the research discussed in this article—was released in 2009.

The new affordances of Web 2.0 tools—a group of technologies that include blogs, wikis, podcasts, RSS feeds, and microblogs—facilitate collaborative and socially connected online literacy practices in which users co-construct the information space (Davies & Merchant, 2009). These online tools provide an infrastructure that supports collaborative digital media design, encouraging what Jenkins (2009) describes as a “participatory culture” of digital media production. Teachers are giving students the opportunity to draw on these out-of-school media literacies to enhance in-school literacy learning. These tools have also been effectively used for knowledge building and knowledge sharing in higher education (Chandra & Lloyd, 2008).

In educational settings, these shifts in Web-based social practices call for changes to print-based pedagogies for reading and writing to include authentic digital forms of communication used today. The increasing digitalization of print is here to stay, giving impetus for literacy educators to extend the limits of their existing practices to more closely reflect the way literacy is used in society.

What Is Microblogging?

Microblogging allows users to share information in very brief texts (e.g., 140-character “tweets” in Twitter) to “friends” or “followers” using multiple sources and tools, including websites, third-party applications, or mobile devices. Unlike traditional blogging, brevity is essential. Updates appear to friends and followers as a continuous newsfeed, amalgamated with updates from other subscribers. Others can
comment on the updates or reply directly to the message sender. Friends and followers, depending on the application used, can then comment on the updates or reply directly to the sender. Publicly accessible microblogging platforms include Twitter, FriendFeed, Jaiku, and Plurk, while the status updates embedded within sites like Facebook, MySpace, and LinkedIn also support microblogging (DeVoe, 2009).

The small corpus of microblogging studies has pointed to the benefits of using platforms such as Twitter to enable mobile communication between students and course facilitators in remote regions (Al-Khalifa, 2008). Other studies have compared microblogging responses to conventional journal writing, observing that students wrote about a topic more frequently over a more extended period of time when using microblogging, leading to deeper cognitive engagement with scientific topics and dialogue among the classroom community (Ebner & Maurer, 2008). Most recently, Ebner, Leinhardt, Rohs, and Meyer (2010) have explored the potentials of microblogging to support process-oriented learning through the rapid feedback from other students and teachers the technology affords, and the transfer of learning between formal and informal learning contexts. This emerging research has not investigated microblogging as a social and literacy practice.

**Research Description**

Theoretically framed in the tradition of New Literacy Studies, this case study examined new uses of microblogging as an emergent literacy practice in an institution of higher education. Specifically, our research question asked, What are the potentials of microblogging for literacy learning in an educational community? We anticipated that meaningful contexts for literacy practice might be created through the use of this very recently developed technology. EDMODO, a secure and free microblogging platform designed for use in educational contexts, was selected as a flexible service to use in the study.

**Research Context and Participants**

Microblogging activities were incorporated into the course work of a preservice teacher education program in the Faculty of Education of an Australian university. The 166 participating students were enrolled in a compulsory unit within the Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) curriculum strand in the third year of a Bachelor of Education (Primary) degree program. All participants had some prior experience with ICT. However, this was the only course in the Bachelor of Education program that specifically prepared them for using ICT in the classroom. The preservice teachers, male and female, would graduate at the end of a fourth year, qualified to teach in Australian primary schools (students aged 4.5 to 15 years). While the majority of the preservice teachers were aged 19 to 21 years, there was also a significant group of “mature” students who had not commenced their teaching degree immediately upon graduation from high school.

The course coordinator worked with two tutors to facilitate six tutorial groups. The facilitators had extensive experience in teaching ICT. However, all the facilitators had only recently become acquainted with educational microblogging platforms, given the advent of EDMODO only in 2009, and this was the first time that microblogging had been included in the ICT unit of study. All students were required to participate in the ICT unit as part of their course work. Data published in this paper has the voluntary, informed, and written consent of the participants. Pseudonyms are used in the publication of this research. The consent was obtained after the students had completed the course, thereby avoiding possible implications of coercion.

**The Microblogging Tasks**

The two key aims of the microblogging component of the course were, first, to increase preservice teachers’ technical competence with a microblogging platform (EDMODO) through firsthand experience, and second, to give students the opportunity to investigate and reflect on the possible utility of microblogging for literacy learning.
theme was the need for courage to pursue one’s dreams collaboratively, while demonstrating moral integrity.

After participating in the online collaborative writing task, students wrote a reflective blog entry to evaluate the potentials of microblogging in their future classroom. Unlike the collaborative story writing activity, the reflective blog was set up as a private class community journal, so that students in the tutorial group were unable to view one another’s comments. This was intended to encourage originality in reflections, and it enabled the facilitator to capture a greater diversity of responses from the students. Students were also asked to reflect on the following questions:

1. Where could this application be used?
2. How could this be integrated?
3. What would students learn?
4. Why should this application be used?
5. Which key learning theory could be addressed?

Data Collection and Analysis
The case study data included the entries to the story thread from each tutorial group and the reflective blogs. Approximately 330 digital artifacts were collected, representing full participation by the students enrolled in the course. Data analysis involved systematically coding the key themes and findings in the two data sets. Examples drawn from raw data were selected for inclusion in this article when they served to illustrate the salient findings. We also used concept maps (graphic organizers) to trace the characters, plots, and subplots of the microblogging stories.

Findings
Four recurring themes emerged as salient from the coding of the two data sets:

1. Microblogging blurs the distinction between authors and readers.
2. Microblogging transforms elements of the writing process.
3. Microblogging creates a supportive virtual community of learners.
**Blurring the Distinction Between Authors and Readers**

Once posted to the microblogging platform, entries are rapidly followed by feedback. Unlike writing a single-authored story, microblogging requires that multiple authors read, comprehend, and draw inferences from the contributions of others to maintain the internal consistency of the text. Unlike blogs that can often relate to a lead piece, microblogging threads have a 140-character limit that equalizes the contributions, so that no single contribution is more dominant than another.

With the exception of those who only read microblogging threads, this practice involves a rapidly interactive and transparent process of text creation and distribution. A number of students independently pointed to the potentials of microblogging for the complementary processes of reading and writing. For example, Justin wrote that microblogging actively engages students with reading and writing through the “hook” of technology. Students are encouraged to read through all posts before submitting their own: requiring them to interpret and infer meaning from the information and continue the blog.

The microblogging activity required its multiple authors to draw on metacognitive reading comprehension strategies, such as previewing a text to activate background knowledge, clarifying their understanding of the text as they read, and making inferences to draw conclusions about the possible directions of the unfinished text (Mills, 2008). Unlike authors of print-based texts, microbloggers are simultaneously readers and authors. Microblogging allows students who are physically remote from the classroom to occupy the same reading and writing space in rapidly interactive writing. For example, Karen commented,

After completing the workshop...I saw the value of using educational micro–blogging sites... The activity required us to contribute a short passage to a narrative, but in doing so, I engaged in a substantial amount of reading and planned my contribution so it would be cohesive and add depth to the story.

Microblogging facilitates proficient reading in a read–write environment. The unfinished nature of a microblogging thread necessitates that multiple users make predictions about the subsequent entries, requiring an internal consistency with the work of the previous authors. Facilitators found that using graphic organizers, such as a concept map of the plot and a sociogram of the characters, provided a helpful visual representation of the complex development of characters and events. Users revisited the site to make multiple posts, to blog their reflections on the activity, or secondarily assume the role of a spectator. In this way, text processing occurred not only during microblogging, but long after the students had posted a response.

**Transforming Elements of the Writing Process**

Unlike conventional forms of print-based writing, which readers cannot modify, microblogging is characterized by rapid interactivity between authors and readers. There was a quality of transparency and immediacy among users as their writing was distributed to a peer audience within moments of its construction. The activity required engagement with existing content in the thread to further improve upon it. We observed that microblogging threads are not static, discrete units, but are dynamic and malleable, open to reauthoring multiple times. This evolutionary development of the written text led to a continual and iterative process as the narrative became repeatedly over-written with complex subplots and multilayered characters. As Rebecca commented, “This software also allows the students to grow and develop their own and each other’s work.”

In this respect, microblogging was found to be a meta-discursive practice, reflecting upon itself as each new reader-author added posts in the thread. This practice differed, for example, from a single-authored printed text, which does not invite or depend on the reflective contributions of its readers. A single authoritative voice, frequently found in books, was replaced by a multivoiced text. This is a feature of microblogging for a range of purposes, and is not limited to relaying stories. For example, all the posts in a Twitter feed bring together multiple entries by different authors that relate to a similar theme or new event. There are invariably multiple authors who contribute to a thread or within an RSS feed of entries that comment on a related theme.

Unlike text messaging or online chat, students used full sentences, capitalization, and punctuation,
did not respond to the most recent update. When constructing in-class threads, users must understand the immediacy of microblogging, which necessitates a system of turn taking. This problem was eliminated once the facilitators appreciated this feature and organized the students to refresh their browsers and respond in order.

A benefit of microblogging is that the complexity of the writing task, in terms of both structure and content, can be modified to suit a wide range of literacy abilities. Participation in microblogging was achievable for all preservice teachers, who ranged in age from late teens to middle age and who were from ethnically diverse backgrounds. As Karen commented, I would integrate this program into my classroom because it caters to diversity and different learning styles and brings new life to traditional writing activities. It’s an inclusive learning tool.

Creating a Supportive Community of Learners

A consistent theme in the students’ evaluative blogging posts was the recognition of a supportive community of writers. Michael blogged, I appreciate the collaborative approach to learning that this application provides—instant messaging and the ability for the class to be able to see their peers’ work contributes to a sense of classroom community.

Students concluded their story entries with conjunctions (“but,” “until”) and ellipses to indicate an unfinished thought, serving to cue peers to anticipate new events in the storyline. The posts were creative and entertaining, with descriptive vocabulary and varied sentence structures. For example, Chris posted, Jimbo turned around and saw Lady Gaga...and squealed with fright! She looked at him with crazy eyes—the magical disco stick was bait to lure...Lady Gaga wanted to wear Jimbo as her next outrageous costume. She lunged for him....

Weaving intertextual references to popular iconic figures from movies, songs, and the media, the students made connections to their existing knowledge and experiences (e.g., taking exams), the world (e.g., Jenga games), and other texts (e.g., Gorilla King, Harry Potter, and the Chronicles of Narnia). Microblogging can also involve cross-referencing texts through embedded hyperlinks or hash tags (called “twemes” in Twitter). While the participants were not required to insert hash tags, some inserted hyperlinks for peers to access information about educational uses of microblogging.

A quality that was difficult to achieve in some microblogging threads was coherent organization or structure. This occurred when the first class of students attempted to upload their posts simultaneously. Students prepared their entries after reading the previous posts, but unless they refreshed the page, they did not respond to the most recent update. When constructing in-class threads, users must understand the immediacy of microblogging, which necessitates a system of turn taking. This problem was eliminated once the facilitators appreciated this feature and organized the students to refresh their browsers and respond in order.

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Similarly, Sarah used the term “community of learners” to describe the potential to “use the ideas of my peers in extending and developing the storyline.”

These comments draw attention to the increased collaboration in creating and sharing content afforded by online networks. In traditional writing classrooms, there is a greater emphasis on individual authorship and the teacher as an authoritative source of knowledge. In contrast, there is an important discursive shift during microblogging. In our study, peers refocused the thread when there were inconsistencies in the plot. For example, in one tutorial group, Barbara censured the inclusion of unwholesome themes in the thread, such as stealing, gambling, and taking revenge, by the previous writers. Barbara wrote, “Meanwhile, Flatus, whose real name is Fredrick, decided to take his mother’s advice seriously (Considering this story is for Year 5 students)” Barbara’s post demonstrates
The preservice teachers identified the unique supportive environment offered by online collaborative writing, particularly for students who experience difficulty composing written texts: “For those students who struggle with reading and writing microblogging is a way of allowing them to participate in these avenues without feeling pressured.” This comment draws attention to microblogging within “communities of practice” (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Whether microblogging in the classrooms or from home, students are bonded together through a common endeavor, involving multiple but integrated responses. Members of a microblogging community draw upon broad rather than narrow knowledge, which is distributed across various geographical sites such as educational institutions, libraries, Internet cafes, or home. The content of microblogging posts is not located in books or a single individual, but in the collective contributions of the community.

The co-creation and co-construction of texts and concepts is central to microblogging, unifying communities that are not constrained by rank. The logic of the co-construction of knowledge is a keystone both to the knowledge economy and the education that will support it (Kalantzis & Cope, 2008). Microblogging is a computer-mediated form of communication that is producing social practices and conceptions of communities of learning across time and space that differ from print-based models of writing in educational sites.

**Promoting Self-Initiated Literacy Practices**

There was 100% participation in the online microblogging activity, with high levels of interest expressed in the students’ reflective posts. Microblogging was tied to the demonstration of self-initiated literacy practice. Students reported that they voluntarily continued reading new entries for pleasure, even when they had completed their required contribution for course evaluation. This self-initiation of literacy practices was
evident in the workshops when students discussed the activity: “I found it highly engaging, although I did my post in class time, I have logged on a few times to read the other stories,” remarked Teagan.

The students openly expressed enjoyment in jointly constructing a text, a recurring theme in the students’ evaluation of this technology. William wrote,

This application will definitely be considered within my future classroom as it is a fun way for students to construct a piece of writing.... It allows students to freely explore their ideas in a seemingly “anonymous” environment without the heavy time constraints for responding, as usually seen in a classroom.

Furthermore, microblogging strengthened the connections between students’ out-of-school and in-school literacy practices, providing students with unrestrained “opportunities to post several comments whenever they wish to, at home or at school,” as Julia noted. Microblogging is a medium that enables learning connections through written dialogue that extends beyond the boundary of classroom walls (Holotescu & Grosneck, 2009).

Microblogging illustrates the ways in which the nature of in-school and out-of-school learning is changing (see Table 1). In the past, school learning was geographically, institutionally, and temporally defined. Microblogging is a ubiquitous practice that can be geographically and temporally unlimited: Users can contribute and receive feedback from peers and the teacher anywhere, at anytime. Nevertheless, there continues to be an authority-novice relationship between facilitator and students that places some boundaries around the content of the posts. Therefore, this form of learning remains specifically educational.

**Microblogging Meets the English Teacher**

Teachers can begin by setting up a class microblogging account using a public platform or secure educational site that can be accessed only by teachers and students. Microblogging services that allow users to choose the level of openness of the social network, including private or closed settings for communication within the classroom or school, are the most suitable for educational contexts. For example, Shout-’em includes features to enable the teacher to limit access for sharing content to specified members within the educational community of users (DeVoe, 2009).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>Microblogging Feature</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mobile</td>
<td>Mobile browsers frequently support microblogging. Participation via mobile phone or tablet makes microblogging a social practice that can occur anytime, anywhere, by anybody.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concise</td>
<td>Posts are usually limited to 140 characters.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linear and multidirectional</td>
<td>Following microblogging posts frequently involves both multidirectional and linear pathways. Users insert hyperlinks to create multidirectional pathways, while entries follow a sequence that is ordered by time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iterative or open to continual reauthoring</td>
<td>Microblogging status updates are not static, discrete units, but are dynamic and malleable, open to reauthoring multiple times.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multivoiced</td>
<td>A single authorial voice is replaced by a multivoiced text. Many authors make brief, yet definitive contributions to the direction of the dialogue.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meta-discursive</td>
<td>Microblogging reflects upon itself as authors comment on previous posts in the thread.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rapidly interactive</td>
<td>Microblogging involves a rapid and transparent process of text creation and distribution. Once posted, entries are quickly followed by feedback.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distributed expertise</td>
<td>Expertise and authority are distributed among the collective participants, rather than located in a single individual.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intertextual</td>
<td>Microblogging can involve cross-referencing texts through embedded hyperlinks or hash tags.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Setting up a microblogging user account was easy for students in this study, with a limited number of fields requiring the user to enter information. The facilitator chose a system that did not require student e-mail addresses, in order to maintain the anonymity of the users. The interface was user friendly, allowing the teacher to see the class list of participants on a profile page, with hyperlinks to each student’s entry. The site was not overloaded with graphics, which facilitated the fast upload of the webpages, and it was free of pop-ups and advertising.

In our study, students consistently noted that EDMODO afforded a secure online environment for collaborative writing. A female student wrote,

I quite enjoyed this micro-blogging activity because the site enables students to interact and share information with each other in a secure and safe environment. The teacher is in control of the website in relation to what students can join and who can view the information.

Similarly, Anita commented, “The web-based application also has the advantage of being a safe and secure network that protects student identities from risks associated with the World Wide Web.”

Irrespective of the platform chosen, students need to reflect critically on the social practice of microblogging. For example, when creating an account profile, the teacher can demonstrate how to consider issues of representing one’s identity, managing security settings, choosing what personal information to conceal, and choosing which microblogging service is best suited to the social purposes and intended audience (Williams, 2008).

Microblogging can be used as a platform for several simple teaching techniques. For example, when introducing new concepts or literature, English teachers can find out what students already know using a “Background Knowledge Probe.” Logged on to a microblogging account in which the students “follow” the teacher, students can post their responses electronically via mobile phone, tablet, laptop, or desktop computer. Students can microblog their response to the open-ended question, “What do you know about _______?” The RSS feed can be displayed on a large screen for class discussion, providing a backchannel for the students and teacher to quickly identify shared starting points for discussion.

After a lesson, invite students to microblog about what they had trouble understanding, answering the question, “What is the muddiest point in this session?” This technique enables the teacher to identify which concepts need to be further consolidated through discussion. Students should be encouraged to be concise in their posts, using accurate and precise vocabulary.

A variation of this activity is the “One-Minute Paper” in which students are directed to microblog their response to the question, “What was the most important thing that you learned today?” This reflective activity can be used to consolidate knowledge. These activities can be adapted as online conversations after class for students to clarify, evaluate, and integrate ideas and information, promoting active participation with lectures, discussion, homework assignments, novels, plays, or films (Angelo & Cross, 1993).

Another microblogging activity that makes the most of the 140-character limit is the “One Sentence Summary.” Students post a microblog summarizing the gist or main point of a lesson, a chapter in a novel, or an information text. Teachers can set up simple structures, such as challenging students to answer the question, “Who does what to whom, when, where, how, and why?” about a given book or topic (Angelo & Cross, 1993; Skiba, 2008). Such uses of microblogging allow students to rethink and revise their initial ideas using one another’s critical and immediate feedback. Students develop greater authority as literary critics, and they relinquish fears about producing and publishing polished work in academic settings by engaging in the fluid, transparent, and divergent spaces of online communication (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003b).

Ella commented,

Microblogging platforms have a range of affordances in educational settings. Students are able to upload their assignments, interact with their teachers and other students online, and post blogs and upload videos on current activities taking place in the classroom. Teachers can also keep a record of student achievement by posting results for assignments and exams online and make them available to students through their profiles. This application allows students to participate in a virtual community in a secure and interactive environment.
Rather than one that is closed, static, and bound. The increased dialogue and rapid interactivity between multiple authors and readers is coupled with a need to acknowledge differing viewpoints. These distinctive features of microblogging highlight the dynamic and interactive social relations in workplaces and global communications environments today (Mills, 2010b).

The increasing role of digital technologies for communication is one of the major reasons why theories of literacy and semiotics associated with the New Literacy Studies and multiliteracies are taking into account new textual practices. There is no imprecision in broadening conventional understandings of literacy learning to extend beyond print. Rather, it is a well-reasoned effort not to exclude literacy practices that are augmented and modified by digital formats. With the advent of secure and free microblogging platforms, students can now engage in immediate, spontaneous, hyperlinked, collaborative, and democratic arenas for knowing and communicating in a supportive learning community. In conclusion, in the words of Twitter, we ask, What are you doing?

References


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More to Explore

ReadWriteThink.org Lesson Plan

• “Using Microblogging and Social Networking to Explore Characterization and Style” by Suzanne Linder

IRA Books


IRA Journal Articles

• “Literate Arts in a Global World: Reframing Social Networking as Cosmopolitan Practice” by Glynda A. Hull and Amy Stornaiuolo, Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy, October 2010