Abstract

This study presents information of the changes social media is causing on student’s formal writings. The aim of this study was to find some of the most common errors that instructors are finding in student’s writing projects and compare them to errors found on various student run Facebook pages. Facebook was used in this study over other social media sites because it allows people to post longer statuses making it easier to detect errors. Others such as Twitter, Tumbler and Instagram were not chosen due to the fact that they have limited character count available to each post which encourages the use of internet slang and shorthand. In order find the errors instructors are finding I sent out a survey to composition instructors around campus. The survey covers common errors that instructor find in assigned essays and how they are dealing with these problems.

Literature Review: Social Media and its Changes on Student’s Formal Writing

Most errors that instructors are finding are not just found occasionally in a small number of students but are found frequently in most student’s papers. It is important to fix these errors and teach students error-free writing to improve clarity and meaning of their formal writing. The main issues that most studies are finding deal with spelling, grammar, sentence or paragraph structure, and formality. Although these problems are evident, most studies come to the general consensus that social media is actually boosting literacy in today’s youth.

Reading

Most students are constantly on their phones, computers, and tablets, and are never very far from the internet. According to a study done by the Jackson City Patriot staff students do very little reading during the summer months while they are out of school, but studies done by the Alberta Teachers’ Association and Vicki Coleman argue that students are in fact reading more. The study conducted by the Alberta Teachers’ Association surveyed around 5,000 students between the ages six and seventeen. The results were that around 20% of students never read fiction or nonfiction books, 67% were on different websites weekly, 55% read emails regularly, and 46% checked blogs (Alberta Teachers Association 1). Students may not be reading class material, which may be why people think that students are reading less, but they are constantly taking in new information every time they access the internet or log onto a social media site. In a study conducted by Mary Durlack, she found that students were reading the assigned material but would often not participate in class discussions. Durlack came up with the idea to use Twitter, after she noticed that the majority of her students were members,
to hold class discussions. Her results showed that students that were generally silent in class were participating in discussions that were taking place on Twitter, and were talking about the assignments outside of class as well by engaging in discussions with graduate students.

Creativity

Along with increasing reading in students, social media and blogs are also increasing creativity. A study conducted by The National Literacy Trust has shown that out of 3,001 students surveyed 57% who actively blog or are on social media enjoy writing more than the students who are not active on social media. These students felt more confident in their writing, and believed themselves to be strong creative writers. Studies done by The Alberta Teachers’ Association and The National Literacy Trust have also shown that students who blog or are active on social media write short stories, song lyrics, or keep a personal journal. One of the instructors that answered my survey also agreed that they believed social media is increasing creativity in students.

Grammar and Spelling

A problem that some studies, such as those conducted by the Jackson City Patriot staff and Jamie Perkins, are finding is that sites are not encouraging proper grammar usage. Twitter, for example, only lets people post tweets of 140 characters which doesn’t always allow for complete sentences, and usually results in run-ons and fragments. Perkins believes that the short character count is leading to a shorter attention span when it comes to reading and writing and affecting the ability to write correct sentences. This also leads to poor word choice. Students tend to use a short hand of internet slang, and abbreviations to keep text short this had led to some students using this form of writing in their formal writing.

Apostrophe usage, especially with words your and you’re, is also usually an error that is commonly found. Most students don’t know when to use which form of these words and therefore more often use the wrong one. The study done by Jackson City Patriot staff attributes these types of mistakes to social media not encouraging careful reading and editing of posts.

Spelling is another problem that is a common occurrence. This can also bring up the problem of the shorthand communication that is being used. There are some students who continuously use the spelling of your or you’re, you and are as “U”, “UR” and “R” as if they don’t know the difference between which is right and wrong.

Studies are also find a problem with capitalization. Some students tend to not capitalize the word “I” and some proper nouns. Most phones and computers will automatically fix some of these errors which causes a reliance to form on autocorrect to catch all capitalization mistakes.
Formality

Formality is an issue because students are writing their formal papers in a more casual tone. In Jamie Perkins’ study he noticed that people were not using complete sentences and were using a shorthand approach in their formal writings. This also relates back to the grammar problems. The short hand is decreasing the tone and the attitude of these papers which makes it unacceptable for academic and professional writing. Even though social media is increasing small talk communications it is greatly hurting how students conduct their academic writing.

Methods

The first part of this study was conducted by using previously existing studies to find what other researches were finding. The studies chosen are “Is Social Media Affecting Literacy?”, “Social Media as a Primary Source: A Coming of Age”, “Can Social Networking Boost Literacy Skills?”, “Children Who Blog Or Use Facebook Have Higher Literacy Levels” which all conclude that social media is having more positive effects than negative on students, and “Twitter and Literacy: Do Young Writers Even Know LOL and YOLO Aren’t Real Words?”, and “Texting, Social Media Sites Causing Bad Habits in Our Students” which argue that social media it hurting literacy skills beyond repair. A total of eight sources were chosen each having various results. The topics of these studies ranged from grammar to creativity to classroom engagement. Each of these studies also have various results, some saying that social media is having negative impacts, positive impacts, and no impacts.

The purpose of using the preexisting studies was to find what the most common errors were being found. I wanted to examine at a larger scale what errors were being found to see if those errors could also be found in significant numbers in my local research. The most common mistakes I found were grammatical, so I decided to base my research on what errors were occurring most on social media and how often those errors were being found in students formal papers.

The next step was to evaluate social media. Facebook was chosen because it allows people to write longer post where other social media sites like Twitter have a limit on how many characters can go in a post. I selected at total of five student run Facebook pages to examine for grammatical and spelling errors, and also how often students are using internet slang in their post. The pages chosen were Angelo State Trading Card Club, Angelo State Martial Arts Club, Angelo State German Club, Texas Tech Wildlife Club, and Texas Tech Bowling Club. I chose these clubs because they are run by students that active in the clubs and not officially managed.

There were a total of 326 post throughout the five pages going back two years. I decided to go back two years to ensure that there would be enough data. When looking for the grammatical errors I identified general errors in every post and found a total of 270. When counting the spelling mistakes I only found 36 total mistakes and only 17 uses of internet slang. After finding the number of grammatical errors I determined the ones that occurred most commonly. These errors are what I based the survey (see
appendix) sent out to Angelo State University English composition instructors. I chose composition instructors to survey due to the large amount of essays they review.

The survey consisted of questions concerning the grammatical errors found in the Facebook evaluation, formatting questions on how often students wrongly format MLA and APA, and questions on how or if professors are changing their teaching methods to accommodate social media practices. Most of the grammatical errors that professors found most often were also those found most often in the Facebook post that I examined.

The majority of the professors surveyed agree that social media is having negative effects on students writing. They feel that students don’t know how to write for the correct audience, and that they overlook their errors out of habit from ignoring them on social media. The way most professors accommodate to the changes in students writing is stressing the issues. Professors are pointing out the errors that they find and showing students the correct ways to fix these errors. One of the professors surveyed said that they show emails and other student’s paper to their students highlighting the errors in writing for the correct audience and grammar.

Results

I examined the results of the survey and the most common error that was found on the Facebook pages, misuse of commas, was said to be found by 100% of composition instructors often while the use of internet slang was the only question that some professors surveyed (18.18%) indicated they never found in students formal papers (Figure 1). One of the biggest differences I found between the Facebook errors and the survey errors is spelling.
1. How often do you find apostrophe errors? (i.e. you’re, your, they’re there and their)
   Never  Rarely  Sometimes  Often

2. How often do you find misuse of commas? (i.e. comma splice, fragment, run on sentences)
   Never  Rarely  Sometimes  Often

3. How often do you find capitalization errors? (i.e. proper nouns, beginning of sentences)
   Never  Rarely  Sometimes  Often

4. How often do you find the use of internet slang? (i.e. U, U:, OMG, Lol)
   Never  Rarely  Sometimes  Often

5. How often do you find spelling errors?
   Never  Rarely  Sometimes  Often

6. How often do you find homonym errors?
   Never  Rarely  Sometimes  Often

7. How often do you find MLA/APA formatting errors?
   Never  Rarely  Sometimes  Often

8. With social media becoming more popular how do you think it is changing students writing?
9. As a result of changes in students writing are you changing your teaching methods to accommodate these changes? If so, how?
10. Besides the errors in the previous questions what are some other commonly found errors?

In the survey I also included free response questions on how and if instructors are changing their teaching methods to accommodate the changes in students' writing (Figure 1). Most instructors said that they try to emphasize correct grammar and formatting but are not in other ways changing their teaching methods. Of instructors surveyed five out of eleven said that they believed that students should know how to write for the correct audiences, and that social media is hurting their ability to distinguish how to address their formal writing.
Out of the 326 Facebook posts that I reviewed, only thirty-six spelling errors were found (Figure 2); however, the survey that was sent out the English instructors indicated that spelling errors are an error that is found most commonly in their students’ formal papers (Figure 3). I believe this difference to be the cause of students using words that they are not familiar with in their formal papers while on social media they use basic and common words that they use every day.

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Besides misuse of commas and spelling errors the most common errors found in the survey were homonym errors and capitalization errors. The majority of composition instructors said that they sometimes to often found these errors in student’s formal writings. These errors were also frequently occurring in the Facebook pages that I examined.

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Discussion

This research project had multiple limitations that restricted the results. The main limitation was the small sample size and restriction of material. I was unable to review students’ papers personally; therefore I had to rely on what the professors surveyed were able to tell me they were finding with a limited question survey. Another main problem is the time limitation, with only a year to research this topic this problem relates back to having to have a limited sample size. I was able to go back two years on the Facebook pages to collect data, but if I had time to go back further I could have narrowed down more what mistakes where being made most often on social media. This research has potential to improve if the sample size could be increased, and the social media be expanded to more than only Facebook to observe how students change the tone and grammar on the different sites.

If this research were to be enlarged to more sites and over a longer period of time, I believe that the results would show a larger difference in how students write on social media versus how they write in their formal papers; however this research cannot determine how large of a difference it is due to its restrictions. Due to these restrictions I could not come to definite conclusions on whether or not social media is effecting how students are writing in their formal papers.
References