

Twitteracy: Using Twitter to promote academic literacy

January 6 2014, by Mary A. Durlak



Pictured: Participants Madison Ackerman (graduate student); Heidie Caraway (teacher), Buffalo high school students, and Jevon Hunter

By using Twitter—the social network whose users communicate in "tweets" no more than 140 characters long—a Buffalo teacher engaged a group of high school students in a spirited discussion of a novel.

Heidie Caraway, '08, '11, assigned *The Giver* by Lois Lowry to students in her ninth and tenth grade English language arts classes at Health Science Charter School. They read the book dutifully, but Caraway wanted them to achieve a deeper level of engagement. She discussed her goals with Jevon Hunter, assistant professor of elementary education and reading at Buffalo State, under whom she had studied.

Hunter's ideas about literacy reflect his belief that students are fluent in many literacies. "Literacy is more than just reading and writing," he said. "It includes the attitude and beliefs and assumptions that shape the spoken and written word to the audience you're addressing. Most students are fluent in multiple literacies. They talk to their friends one way, and to their parents and grandparents in another way."

Academic fluency is another kind of literacy. "I don't privilege it above other modes of discourse," Hunter said. However, he is interested in helping students—especially urban youth—to become fluent in academic literacy so that they can succeed in [high school](#) and go on to college.

Caraway reviews her teaching daily to see what worked and what didn't, and she brings an ethnographer's eye to her classroom. "I noticed that my students use Twitter all the time," she said. As she and Hunter discussed ways to heighten her students' interest in discussing literature, they came up with the idea of using Twitter to discuss *The Giver*. Several of Hunter's graduate students volunteered to serve as facilitators in the discussion.

The [high school students](#) participated by using self-created Twitter names that kept them anonymous to each other. "Students who were quiet in class spoke up on Twitter," said Caraway. Her students discussed their ideas, with the graduate students bringing their knowledge and skills to the conversation. Their input helped the younger students deepen their ability to sustain conversations about literature.

"We noticed that my students started to discuss the book outside of class and on the weekends," said Caraway. She spotlighted "Tweets of the Day," and her students responded with enthusiasm as they recognized that their own ideas had enough value to become teaching tools. Taking part in a discussion with graduate students—students who already had

earned a bachelor's degree—was also validating.

The experiment turned out to be extraordinarily successful, and a team presented the project at the annual conference held by the National Council for Teachers of English in Boston in November. The team included several students from Health Science Charter School, graduate student Madison Ackerman from Buffalo State, Caraway, and Hunter.

"The students' presentation generated a lot of interest," said Hunter. "We gave English teachers some ideas about how to use students' existing skills to strengthen their literacy skills. But most important, we gave these high school [students](#) an experience that helps them attain higher academic achievement."

Provided by Buffalo State

Citation: Twitteracy: Using Twitter to promote academic literacy (2014, January 6) retrieved 28 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2014-01-twitteracy-twitter-academic-literacy.html>

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