



LAYERED LITERACIES

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Peeling Back the Adolescent Armor:

Putting a Positive Spin on Using Social Media for Secret Sharing

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“I feel bare. I didn’t realize I wore my secrets as armor until they were gone and now everyone sees me as I really am.”

—Tris in *Insurgent* (Roth, 2012, p. 151)

Teenagers like to think that they are made of armor—that “words will never hurt them.” However, adolescence can be a difficult time for many middle and high school students, particularly when growing up in the digital world. Social media sites and apps simultaneously allow users to reveal and also hide who they are. Helping adolescents navigate this world can be difficult for parents and teachers alike.

This past year, during Michelle’s English Language Arts Methods course, several of her preservice undergraduate students were huddled together chatting about a problem they saw in their field placements. A messaging app, called Sarahah, was wreaking havoc at their middle schools. Their students were posing questions and posting videos and pictures of themselves, and other students (presumably classmates) were anonymously responding. The students who originally posted wanted feedback from their peers; however, instead of receiving kind feedback, students were using this app to bully each other.

Because a user responds anonymously, no one knew who had written the hateful comments. Although some middle school students were cyberbullied, they continued to use the app to connect with friends.

Michelle’s preservice teachers were bewildered by this and wanted to know what to do. Although she had not heard of this app, she told the preservice teachers that she would brainstorm some ideas. Over the course of the semester, she wondered about the ways in which English teachers could combat this problem through layered literacy work—in other words, combining young adult literature, social media apps, and multimodal stories as a way for English teachers to talk more openly with their students about potential perils of social media use. One YA text that can open up such conversations is *Life by Committee* by Corey Ann Haydu (2014).

Life by Committee

Life by Committee is a story about Tabitha, a book-loving, gifted student who has recently been shunned by her two best friends who think her new look is too grown up and slutty. Her parents, with whom she has a close relationship, are young and a bit reckless but still loveable in their hipster ways. Tabitha distances herself from them, as she is struggling to cope with a new baby on the way. Additionally, Tabitha has a serious and not-so-secret crush on her classmate’s boyfriend, Joe, who she chats with online each night.

As she navigates this difficult time, she turns to an online website, called Life by Committee (LBC).

As English teachers, it is important to think about our role in supporting students' responsible use of these online digital tools and in facilitating thoughtful conversations about the role these media should have in shaping who we are and how others view us.

This anonymous online community requires members to share their secrets and ask the group to give assignments that attempt to empower the members to act upon their problems. However, the online community doesn't always give the best advice and bullies its members into engaging in questionable behaviors. Throughout the novel, Tabitha is tormented with the

tasks she is assigned, their ethical implications, and the possible repercussions, while at the same time craving the group's attention.

Overall, adolescent readers will find themselves simultaneously rooting for Tabitha while finding her naive. Tabitha's story is authentic in its complicatedness; she is a mess and makes stupid choices, but in the end, she is highly relatable in regard to her social media usage. Like Tabitha, the teens in our ELA classrooms will continue to find online outlets to share parts of themselves, so teachers, too, need to find ways to

help their students imagine positive ways to use social tools to seek understanding of peers rather than to bully each other.

Adolescents' Social Media Use

Adolescents often feel pulled in multiple directions as they gain more independence from their families, begin discovering who they are, and consider how they fit in with their peers. Their need for privacy and their need for connection to others is often at odds. While teens in the past might have shut their bedroom doors or put locks on their diaries, today's teens carve out their own spaces online through various social media platforms. In those spaces, they lay bare their minds, bodies, and souls, sometimes in public ways, but also increasingly through the guise of anonymity.

For example, on the *Life by Committee* website that Tabitha joins, the rules are quite clear: "No

names, it says. No locations. We are from everywhere. We are everyone" (p. 70). Tabitha, under the anonymous screen name Bitty, shares, like all the other members of LBC, "at least one secret a week" (p. 73). The secrets include things like: kissing someone else's boyfriend; being bulimic; not wanting to go to college; buying a history paper off the Internet.

As teens have become more tech savvy, they have started resisting media platforms that archive material, such as Facebook and Twitter, to connect and share information about their lives. Instead, adolescents are opting for less permanent avenues, such as Snapchat and Instagram stories, and anonymous messaging apps, like Sarahah or, in the case of *Life by Committee*, an online discussion community. No matter how savvy adolescents may be, social media has its pitfalls. Figuring out how to help adolescents navigate this semi-private world can be hard. As English teachers, it is important to think about our role in supporting students' responsible use of these online digital tools and in facilitating thoughtful conversations about the role these media should have in shaping who we are and how others view us.

In Real Life (IRL)

Social media helps teens feel more connected to their friends' feelings and daily lives and can help support them through challenging times (Lenhart, Smith, Anderson, Duggan, & Perrin, 2015). Despite these positive feelings, adolescents reported witnessing, experiencing, or personally engaging in problematic online behaviors. For example, according to a 2011 Pew Survey, among teen social media users, 88% have seen cruel behaviors on a social network site. Of that group, 90% say they ignored the mean behaviors they witnessed, 67% witnessed others joining in, and 21% of them joined in on the harassment, too. Interestingly, teens in this study preferred to view this cruelty as "drama" rather than using the term "bullying" (Lenhart et al., 2011).

Seventy-five percent of adolescents also reported that people are less authentic on social media than they are offline. Additionally, even when teens reveal authentic representations of themselves online that they did not share with others in real life, their peers are skeptical (Lenhart et al., 2015). They don't always find those representations to be authentic or genuine.

As teens figure out who they are both in real

life and online, they are often drawn to social media that allows anonymous posting, like Sarahah or, in Tabitha’s case, LBC. The lure of more secretive platforms seems to be that teens are able to share private information or thoughts without the risk of acquiring permanent labels; they can explore differing perspectives and try on identities and personas. Anonymity allows teens to probe and experiment with those parts of self without being rejected in real life. For example, in *Life by Committee*, one of the online users, Agnes, does not want to go to college; the group helps her weigh her options, ultimately assigning the task for her to apply for a year of volunteering in another country.

Regardless of the platform, using social media is a risky endeavor for teens. Medical experts have found a strong correlation between social media use, cyberbullying, and depression among US young adults (Lin et al., 2016). Some experts have even coined this phenomenon, “Facebook depression” (O’Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011). In *Life by Committee*, both Tabitha and Sasha, who used the LBC website, become more anxious, depressed, and desperate as the novel progresses. These statistics articulate a need for teachers to engage in conversations around social media use and literacies practices within the ELA classroom. Haydu’s novel provides that opportunity.

In Young Adult Literature (IYAL)

Over the past five years, the amount of young adult literature dealing with online, digital, and social media platforms has grown exponentially. Just like in real life, young adults in these novels are figuring out who they are and who they want to be using social media. Koss and Tucker-Raymond (2014) found that YA characters use digital media as a way of playing with, constructing, and developing their identities. In their study, they found that teens in YAL used digital technologies to construct online identities in one of six primary ways: a) to maintain social status, b) position themselves as part of a group, c) find acceptance, d) find romantic relationships, e) hide one’s true self, and f) be anonymous. Each of these constructions aligns with what teens in real life do.

Koss and Tucker-Raymond (2014) did not move beyond identity construction in their analysis of these texts to look at the role of social media as a secret keeping and sharing device and its potential for cyberbullying. English teachers, however, can easily develop and expand this conversation using a YA novel like *Life by Committee* or several books together in literature circles, encouraging students to compare and contrast how each book explores responsible or irresponsible use of online social spaces. (See Figure 1 for more YA novels dealing with social media use

Figure 1. YA novels about social media and secrets

Book Title/Author	Social Media Used
Albertalli, B. (2015). <i>Simon vs. the homo sapiens agenda</i> . New York, NY: Balzer + Bray.	Email
Cooner, D. (2017). <i>Worthy</i> . New York, NY: Scholastic.	Social Media App
Day, S. (2010). <i>Serafina67: *urgently requires life*</i> . New York, NY: Scholastic.	Blogging
Day, S. (2012). <i>My invisible boyfriend</i> . London, UK: Marion Lloyd.	Emails, DMs
Geiger, A. V. (2017). <i>Follow me back</i> . Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks Fire.	Twitter, SMS, DMs
Gurtler, J. (2014). <i>#16thingsithoughtweretrue</i> . Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks Fire.	Twitter
Hussey, W. (2015). <i>Jekyll’s mirror</i> . Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.	Anonymous social network website
McManus, K. (2017). <i>One of us is lying</i> . London, UK: Penguin.	Social Media App
Ockler, S. (2015). <i>#scandal</i> . New York, NY: Simon Pulse.	Facebook
Schorr, M. (2017). <i>Identity crisis</i> . New York, NY: Simon Pulse.	DMs, Online Community
Vail, R. (2014). <i>Unfriended</i> . New York, NY: Penguin.	Facebook, SMS

and secrets.) Additionally, students could trace how Tabitha and the characters of LBC in *Life by Committee* construct their identity in the six ways mentioned above.

Some people say you are what you eat; but in the world of social media, one might argue you are what you *tweet*. Having discussions about how the online self is simultaneously a *real* and *fake* representation could help students explore a character's conflicts and struggles within the text and also connect the stories to their own lives and social media use. Teachers might also facilitate conversations about how different forms of social media (Snapchat vs. Twitter, etc.) impact how characters or people behave, reveal, or portray themselves.

Humanizing the Other through Shared Secrets and Stories

In 2012, NCTE passed a resolution on confronting bullying and harassment. They urged English teachers to find books, digital media, and other multimodal sources related to bullying and harassment and bring

them into the classroom curriculum as a way to examine and prevent bullying. By layering students' own experiences with social media alongside YA novels' representations of characters' experiences with social media, teachers can begin to work toward this resolution. Sometimes those conversations will be

enough; other times they will not.

Sometimes teachers need to go a step further and provide students with inspiration for creating a kinder, gentler, more tolerant online world where one can share more freely without fear of harassment. Haydu's novel offers some inspiration at the end of the text for this kind of work. When Tabitha decides that sharing secrets anonymously has done more harm than good, she takes an opportune moment at a school assembly to reveal her secrets to the whole school. Her act of bravery inspires others to come on stage and "own up to everything you hate about yourself or secretly love about yourself but know to hide" (p. 282). Through

this experience, the students, administrators, and faculty "are in it together" (p. 286) in a moment of shared empathy and compassion.

Although *Life by Committee* is fiction, teachers could develop a social media project that focuses on sharing secrets in order to find commonalities among each other through storytelling and art. Understanding that being human means we are all fallible and complex can move the conversations around sharing secrets on social media from shaming to celebrating and connecting. In the next section, we describe six projects that do just that. We invite teachers to consider how they might have students view, explore, analyze, and even replicate these projects. Social media can be a power for good if we allow ourselves time to see what unites and binds us rather than divides us. We need to model these practices in our English classrooms.

- **Post Secret:** Post Secret (<https://postsecret.com/>) is an online community art project where people mail in their secrets anonymously on one side of a postcard. The postcards are often handmade and multimodal in design. The creator of this project believes that sharing our secrets brings people together. Several books have been made from the postcards that have been sent over the years.
- **Humans of New York:** Humans of New York (<http://www.humansofnewyork.com/>) started off as a simple photography project and turned into one of the most popular online phenomena with over 20 million followers on social media. Combining photographs of everyday New Yorkers with quotations and short story vignettes, the world has been captivated by the beautiful lives of strangers.
- **The Strangers Project:** Starting with the simple question "What's your story?", Brandon Doman's project (<http://strangersproject.com/>) is about collecting stories in public places around the country. The intention is that through stories and the power of words, we can find a shared humanity, even with strangers.
- **Project Semicolon:** Project Semicolon is an organization (<https://story.projectsemicolon.com/>) dedicated to the prevention of suicide. Through the symbol of the semicolon, people all over the world have tattooed themselves as a reminder and inspiration that one should not give up hope; your story

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isn't over. The website reveals dozens of portraits and stories from people of all ages talking about their experiences and hopes for the future.

- **Before I Die/Confessions:** Artist Candy Chang created two powerful art installations. The first, "Before I Die" (<http://beforeidie.city/>), is a global art project that invites people to contemplate death and reflect on their lives by filling in a blank and writing on a wall. The second, called "Confessions" (<http://confessions.candychang.com/>), was inspired by Post Secret and experiments with concepts of anonymity, vulnerability, understanding, and consolation.
- **The World Needs More Love Letters:** This organization (<http://www.moreloveletters.com/>) uses the power of social media to give love, hope, and inspiration to people all over the world. The task is simple: nominate someone who needs a love letter for whatever reason; the organization will post requests every two weeks on their website. From there, people who feel so moved write and mail a love letter to those strangers who need it.

Conclusion

Helping adolescents navigate the world of social media is of critical importance. Discussing social media use through young adult texts like *Life by Committee* can allow adolescents to become more savvy consumers and producers of digital texts. By layering in multimodal storytelling and analysis projects, teachers can help their adolescent students be more thoughtful and mindful consumers and producers within this digital world. Such instruction can help usher in a new generation of more empathetic and thoughtful human beings.

Doing this work also opens up critical and visionary conversations about what online spaces could and should look like for teens, particularly as they try on real and fake personas through anonymous apps and communities. As much as some adolescents want to believe that they are made of impenetrable armors, we know that cyberbullying is real and has consequences. As English teachers, we need to help our students navigate these ever-changing spaces by imagining positive ways to use social media to understand each other and our shared humanity.

Michelle M. Falter is currently an assistant professor of English Education at North Carolina State University. Formerly, Michelle worked as a middle and high school English teacher in Wisconsin and Georgia and also abroad in Ireland, Germany, and the Dominican Republic. Michelle's scholarship focuses on dialogic, critical, and feminist pedagogies, English teacher education, adolescent literature, and emotion in the teaching of literature and writing in secondary classrooms. Michelle's work has been published in the *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, *Study and Scrutiny: Research in Young Adult Literature*, *English Teaching Practice and Critique*, and *The ALAN Review*, for which she received the 2016 Nilsen-Donelson Award for the Best Article of the Year. Currently, she is working on two coedited books with Steven Bickmore about discussing death through literature in the secondary ELA classroom. They are set to come out in late 2018 with Rowman & Littlefield.

Leigh A. Hall is a professor at the University of Wyoming where she holds the Wyoming Excellence in Higher Education Endowed Chair in Literacy Education. Her research currently examines how to engage middle and high school teachers in online professional development that is interactive and collaborative in nature. Her research has received several awards, including the Outstanding Dissertation award from the International Literacy Association, the Early Career Achievement Award, and the Edward B. Fry Book Award for Empowering Struggling Readers: Practices for the Middle Grades (both from the Literacy Research Association). She has published in such journals as *Research in the Teaching of English*, *Journal of Literacy Research*, *Teachers College Record*, and *Harvard Educational Review*.

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