ENEMIES, embargoes and empowerment: a case study into combating boys’ negative attitudes to writing in the primary classroom

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In this report, the impacts of the use of the popular microblogging social network ‘Twitter’ has had on a group of boys’ negative attitudes to writing in the primary classroom is presented. Over a period of three weeks, a group of four Year 6 boys in a Plymouth primary school, with previously identified negative attitudes to writing, used Twitter as part of their literacy unit on argument writing. The report begins with an exploration of the current issues facing teachers and learners in the 21st century writing classroom, with a focus on the gender differences that dominate much educational discourse. A discussion and analysis of the boys’ attitudes to writing both before and after the implementation of Twitter follows. The benefits and disadvantages of using the platform on the boys’ thoughts and feelings towards the task of in-school writing in literacy are highlighted. This report seeks to argue the case for a reconceptualization of writing in the educational domain, as the children in the study are found to be unaware of their engagement with new modes of writing outside the classroom and disadvantaged within the current writing curriculum in school.

Key words: Boys, Writing, Social Networks, Web 2.0 Learning, Primary Education.

Introduction

Children are being born into a world of rapid social, cultural and technological change in which, even human values and processes are beginning to change with the growth of new technology (‘Homo Interneticus?’, 2010; Prensky, 2009; Harper et al., 2008). If, as educators, we are to effectively prepare the children we teach for successful future lives it is crucial to begin to understand the issues penetrating the vast discourse that surrounds children in this digital age.

The media continuously reports on young children’s prolific use of the Internet, with the current zeitgeist focused on their uses of social networking sites (SNSs) and the potential dangers involved in such activity (see Edwards, 2010; BBC, 2009; Harrison, 2009). However, current government drive recognises the impact technology is having on children, learning and the need for schools to adapt to such change (DCSF, 2009a; DfES, 2005). The development of children’s digital literacy is paramount in order to prepare them for access to their current and future worlds (DCSF, 2009a, p.70) and therefore, the role of literacy in the classroom is being redefined (Carrington, 2005). Literacy should no longer be viewed as the discrete skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening, as it is now recognised as rooted in
social and cultural practices (Gee, 2000, p.180). A more holistic approach to literacy is needed in our present multimodal world, as we interact and deconstruct texts in entirely new ways (Walsh, 2008, p.101).

Such global change has resulted in a ‘revolution in the landscape of communication’ (Kress, 2003, p.9), and developments in technology have provoked a shift in the semiotics and physical interactions involved in the literacy practice of writing (Merchant, 2007, p.123). Writing is no longer reserved for the page; the ubiquity of the screen is changing the concept and process of making meaning from writing, resulting in new challenges for the 21st century literacy learner.

With the development of a wide range of information and communication technologies, and their rapid uptake by young people outside of school (Luckin et al., 2008), there is cause for a critique of home literacy practices and their potential worth in the school domain (Pahl and Rowsell, 2005). Children are already empowered creators of valid and worthwhile digital texts outside the classroom (Dowdall, 2009, p.56); however, children’s literacy and textual needs are not being met in current curricula design (Carrington, 2005, p.24). In particular, boys’ attainment in literacy, and more specifically in writing, is consistently reported as being behind that of girls (DCSF, 2008a); a worrying statistic as literacy is recognised as a fundamental aspect of social wellbeing, and indeed, a prosperous life (National Literacy Trust (NLT), 2009). With this in mind, it is becoming increasingly important to bridge the gap between the home and school literacy practices of children, and indeed, to improve boys’ attitudes to writing.

A review of the literature

Boys and writing

The gap between girls’ and boys’ attainment has been the focus of much educational discourse for a number of years (see Smith, 2003). There have been many different suggestions for such divide, with some considering that boys ‘negotiate their masculine identity and adopt macho values which reject the values of the school’ (Myhill and Fisher, cited in Ofsted, 2005, p.29). Such gender identity has also been considered to influence children’s literacy practices (Millard, 1997, p.16).

Within the subject area of English, the most notable area of gender disparity is in writing (Ofsted 2009, p.7). Certainly, this is not a newly defined issue as Harpin (1976, p.74) highlights that girls on average write more than boys, and calls for teachers to consider this issue in the classroom. A recent survey conducted by the NLT (Clark and Dugdale, 2009) found that boys’ attitudes to writing in the United Kingdom also fell behind those of girls, in terms of their enjoyment of, and feelings towards the act of writing, considering it a laborious task, rather than an enjoyable activity (p.5). The boys surveyed in the NLT report emphasised their lack of transcriptional skills, which are often the focus of negative attitudes to writing (Grainger et al., 2003, p.9; Millard and Walsh, 2001, p.1).

Such significant findings detailed consistently for more than a decade irrefutably require educational action; however, as educators, we need to be aware of the vast range of complexities surrounding the issue (Smith, 2003). Much research suggests that teacher’s perceptions of the issue can be misguided and inaccurate (Maynard, 2002) and that we run the risk of ‘fostering low expectations’ of boys if we continue to view them as unmotivated and
disengaged learners (Beattie, 2007, p.162). Boys’ attitudes must improve if their attainment in writing is to rise; however we must examine and deconstruct generalised observations of gender and writing alongside the context of the classroom, before adapting our practice (Bearne, 2002).

**Previous research**

Research into improving boys’ writing is expansive (see Daly, 2003). The factors that can contribute to a reformation of boys’ negative attitudes to writing are inevitably wide-ranging due to the subjective nature of the area. However, it is worthwhile highlighting some of the key ideas raised in previous research.

Choice and autonomy in writing are regularly stipulated by children as having a positive impact on their attitudes (Grainger et al., 2003, p.10) and for many boys, choosing a topic for narrative writing improves their self-perceptions as writers (Daly, 2003, p.15). Pidgeon (2002), in her research into how best to support boys’ writing in the classroom, similarly notes the benefits of offering choice in writing, and goes on to suggest that in addition, where teachers make writing processes challenging, purposeful and explicit, attitude and attainment are enhanced.

In the pivotal research project ‘Raising Boys’ Achievements in Writing’ (UKLA/PNS, 2004) significant impacts on improving underachieving boys’ negative attitudes were realised by adopting dramatic and visual approaches as stimuli for writing, incorporating reading, speaking and listening into extended units of work. Younger and Warrington (2005, p.49) similarly place great emphasis on the positive impacts drama and speaking and listening have on boys’ attitude and attainment, and call for a holistic approach to the teaching of writing that focuses on ‘becoming a writer’ rather than ‘learning to write’ (p.43).

Key issues raised in recent government documentation regarding how boys’ attitudes and attainment in writing have been improved include the need to provide real contexts, audiences and purposes for writing in order to stimulate and motivate boys’ interest (DCSF, 2009b; Ofsted, 2009). Utilising computers when writing with boys has become somewhat of a cliché; however, where digital platforms have been incorporated into classroom practice, boys’ writing has improved (DCSF, 2009b). Considering that a holistic approach to the teaching of writing that allows for a genuine purpose and audience has been linked to improving boys’ attitudes, alongside consistent findings regarding the use of information and communication technology, it is interesting to explore more specifically, how real world digital writing platforms have been utilised in schools to improve writing practice.

**A case for Twitter**

The case of the dissimilarity of school literacy practice in a world of evolving social literacy practice has been reported widely (Merchant, 2007; Carrington, 2005; Lankshear and Knobel, 2003). The challenge is to bring the ‘genres of schooling closer to the genres of the wider social world’ (DCSF, 2008b, p.8) and through using real world platforms, such as blogs, Davies and Merchant (2009) argue the educational possibilities are profound, remarking that writers are likely to be more engaged and stimulated if writing is placed within the context of an authentic audience. Whilst united with the view of the need for change, Lankshear and Knobel (2003, p.38) do however highlight the quick turnover of new platforms, considering blogging as ‘the tenor of the times’.

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Blogs allow for asynchronous communication which has been previously found, via studies into email communication, to provide a collaborative context for the checking and editing of work and for stimulating interest and enhancing language use (Burnett et al., 2006). Similarly, Kelly and Safford (2009) found that through using blogs in the classroom children exhibited knowledge and understanding in their writing that was almost unseen in their paper based work. It has been suggested that perhaps using SNSs as a writing format in school we can change boys’ negative self-perceptions as writers in allowing for a wider range of writing opportunities that recognise children’s home literacy practices (Clark and Dugdale, 2009, p.35).

Twitter is an online platform that allows for asynchronous dialogic written social networking in the form of a 140 character written ‘tweet’ between ‘followers’ on a certain network. Since 2006, it has grown monumentally in popularity and is currently ranked the 11th most visited website in the world (Alexa, 2010). Published research into the use of Twitter in the primary sector is rare, however its popularity with educators and teachers is widely acknowledged online. Blogs are not peer reviewed and therefore any discussion of views ascertained from a blog is subjective and not wholly reliable. Nonetheless, there is a vast array of professionals blogging about using Twitter in general classroom practice. There are various ways Twitter can be applied in teaching and learning (Wheeler, 2009) and commonly, Twitter’s base in the real world provides benefits to children’s learning across the curriculum (Barrett, 2008; Bray, 2010).

Similarly, in terms of literacy practice, children’s attitudes to writing have been seen to improve as a result of the range of real world opportunities Twitter brings to children’s writing, allowing a purposeful connection with a genuine global audience (Lord, 2009). With ongoing lows in boys’ attitudes to writing and the popularity of technology amongst boys (Clark and Dugdale, 2009), alongside various informal accounts of Twitter’s use in the classroom, I am interested to explore the possible impacts Twitter can have on boys’ negative attitudes to writing, with a focus on the following question:

“How can the use of Twitter in the primary classroom transform a group of boys’ negative attitudes to in-school writing?”

Methodology

My research will take the form of a small-scale case study, reflecting the qualitative and ethnographic nature of the research question (Hayes, 2006) and the in-depth nature of my specific enquiry (Bell, 2005, p.10). Whilst case studies are beneficial in that they allow for a deep exploration of single issues (Hayes, 2006) some have criticised the value of such singularity, noting that generalisation is not always possible (Bell, 2005, p.10). However, qualitative research seeks to understand, not generalise (MacNaughton et al., 2001, p.24) and it is my aim to gain an insight into the possible effects the use of Twitter can have on a group of boys’ negative attitudes to writing, seeking to comprehend reasons behind any transformation.

Twitter has been chosen as the platform for the study due to its essentially text-based nature. Unlike other SNSs, Twitter’s use is based around a 140 character written post, and does not incorporate images or videos into its user interface. As the study is to focus on impacts on attitudes to writing, this platform has been deemed most suitable for use, as it removes the possible impacts the more visual nature of SNSs could have. However, it is important to note,
this could be detrimental from the outset as previous research suggests visual stimuli for writing can improve boys’ attitudes (UKLA/PNS, 2004) and perhaps ignores the multimodal benefits of such online platforms.

The sample for this study will be a group of four Year 6 boys from an inner-city primary school in Plymouth, where the research will take place. All members of the research group will be chosen because of their negative attitudes to writing as identified by the class teacher. Initially, the study was to focus on a sample of children from Year 2 as previous unpublished research has focused on the use of Twitter in Key Stage 1 (Lord, 2009). However, it is considered that Year 6 boys, due to their age, will be more likely to have been predisposed to the use of SNSs outside of school (see Ofcom, 2008, p.5) and therefore will be less affected by their implementation in the classroom in terms of it being a ‘new’ thing. With a relatively small timescale and large amounts of qualitative data to collect, my sample group will be small in size. With this in mind, my report will be limited in the ability to draw generalised conclusions with regards to the impacts on boys’ attitudes to writing on a wider scale.

Permission will be sought from the head teacher, class teacher, children and parents in line with the statement of ethical principles produced for the study. In addition, a project pack with all the important information regarding the study will be created for the head teacher. Such a range of permission will be gathered as the e-safety of the pupils is of paramount importance during this study; unblocking Twitter on the school network will mean bypassing the schools filtered system, resulting in the ability to access anything on the Internet. The Internet is a place of ever changing risk (Livingstone and Bober, 2005, p.34) and therefore every precaution will be taken to ensure the children are kept safe whilst using Twitter. The class teacher and I will carefully monitor the boys’ use of Twitter; an account will be set up; an online network of classrooms and teachers created; an anti-spam service subscribed to; and an e-safety session run with the focus group to ensure their awareness of the nature and possible risks of social networking.

Grouped, semi-structured interviews will be used as the primary means of data collection and carried out before and after the children’s use of Twitter. Group interviews are effective when detailed information is required, however, often one member of the group can prevail in conversations and others can be nervous about sharing opinions opposed by others in the group (Bell, 2005, p. 163). Similarly, it is important to note the possible artificiality of interview situations (Hannan, 2007); considering the children know me from my time spent at the school as a trainee teacher, their answers to my questions may reflect what they think I want to hear, rather than what they actually think.

Nevertheless, interviews will be carried out and recorded before and after the boys’ use of Twitter. The most significant aspects of the interviews will be noted and partial transcripts created. It is simply not effective within the timescale to transcribe every aspect of the interviews and whilst full transcriptions often promote accuracy, my partial transcriptions will be carefully constructed to fully represent each significant part of the interviews (see Arksey and Knight, 1999, p.144).

The use of Twitter will be implemented as part of the boys’ classroom literacy topic of writing arguments, in which the main writing objective is: ‘In non-narrative, establish, balance and maintain viewpoint’ (DCSF, 2010). This study will not focus on attainment and therefore will not formally analyse the standard of the boys’ writing, however, it is necessary to understand the classroom context. The time they spend using Twitter will be out of lesson
time in the morning and afternoon, so as not to interfere with the class teacher and student teacher currently working with the class; though this may impact on possible transformations in attitude as the boys may see this as ‘extra’ work. Issues they discuss in their daily literacy lessons will be the main influence for their writing on Twitter, however members of the boys’ network and I will stimulate discussions and pose questions related to arguments.

Findings and Analysis

It is worthwhile to highlight from the outset that the group only managed to access Twitter nine times over the course of three weeks and therefore their frequency of use was low. This was due to problems encountered when unfiltering Twitter on the school network and the weeklong class residential that took place during the study. Whilst this limited a full exploration of the platform in its ability to transform attitudes, the study has discovered some important issues with regards to boys and writing that require scrutiny if the research is to impact future teaching and curricula.

In analysing the interview responses before and after the study, and from observations of the boys’ use of Twitter, the findings have been categorised under four main headings: choice, purpose and audience, handwriting and concepts of writing. The following is a discussion of the findings from both interviews, as well as an analysis of the boys’ use of Twitter. The boys’ names have been changed for anonymity.

Choice

Interviewer: “What would you change about writing in school...if [the head teacher] put you in charge of writing?”
Ben: “Ban it”.

When asked if they enjoyed writing at school, initially, the majority of the boys (n=3) responded quickly and negatively, with only Paul responding positively. Ben’s negative attitude was clearly visible in his responses as he reflected that, if given the choice, he would ban writing. Evidently, Ben does not see any real benefit or purpose to writing in school, as it would be quickly discarded if he had the choice. Ben’s response signals a rather defeatist outlook on writing, that as it became clear, stemmed from his problems with handwriting. When asked to consider the purposes behind writing, ambivalent attitudes were evident. Clearly, although the boys in general seemed to view writing as a requirement to progress through school rather than recognising any personal enjoyment in the process, they did identify its importance as a life skill.

Interviewer: “What do you enjoy writing most in school?”
Jack: “Stories”.
Ben: “Yeah stories”.
Interviewer: “Yes, why is that?”
Jack: “Because you can make up your own, make it like fantasy”.
Ben: “Yeah you can make it anything you want...you could say...Tom went to the beach and transformed into a robot...or you could do anything”.
Jack: “You can make it as crazy as possible”.
Ben: “Yeah” (laughs).

As the pre-Twitter interviews continued, greater consideration was given to the reasons behind the boys’ dislikes, and specific contexts of writing were detailed as more positive than
The boys all declared their enjoyment in choosing what to write, specifying in particular fictional writing where they could craft their stories to their own agenda. According to DCSF (2009c. p.6), it is an inaccurate generalisation that all boys prefer non-fiction and certainly the boys in this research signal a positive attitude to this form of writing, contrasting with previous research that details boys’ negative attitudes to narrative writing (Maynard and Lowe, 1999, p.5). Regularly, comments were made regarding content in writing, with all the boys suggesting that much writing in school was “boring”, reflecting that if they could choose what to write, they would be likely to write more. The prescriptive nature of in-school writing, therefore, was a barrier to a positive attitude to writing for these boys.

During the use of Twitter, whilst the boys were engaged in the discourse that arose from communication with their network, the literacy focus on argument did not generate as much enthusiasm as the boys own choice for writing; regularly, the boys would include information irrelevant to the topic (figure 1). It was clear that Ben would have preferred to be writing about other topics such as football, and after the study he reflected that some questions people asked were “boring”. In this example, the informality of Ben’s out-of-school communicative writing has been shifted into the school domain and whilst SNSs may empower his social interaction outside of school in allowing him autonomy in the focus of his writing, the barriers of the curriculum have narrowed such empowerment in the classroom. Therefore, the boys’ use of Twitter did not remove the barrier of a prescriptive curriculum, rather it simply altered the way the boys responded to set work.
Where writing was centred on football, a high frequency of response was attained from Jack in particular (figure 2) and therefore his attitude can be seen to have improved. Argument style questions posed on football, and school issues such as uniform and mobile phones achieved the most replies, reflecting the boys’ traditional gender identities (Millard, 1997, p.16). However, generalising this finding would succumb to gender stereotypes that consider boys part of a ‘homogeneous’ group (Smith, 2003, p.288) in which, writing about football could improve attitudes across the board. Nonetheless, in this case study, it is found that where boys’ interests are considered, their willingness to write is increased. Where autonomy and pupil choice is offered in writing disaffected attitudes are improved (Grainger et al., 2003) and in this instance, football has been used as a catalyst to raising attitudes.

Perhaps, the most fundamental shortcoming of this case study was the lack of structure surrounding the boys’ use of Twitter and its indistinct instruction as to whether choice was allowed. Lankshear and Knobel (2003, p.67) find that teachers attempt to fit new technology with old pedagogy, resulting in insignificant impacts on learning and it became clear that I should have considered more thoroughly exactly how the platform was to be used and the resulting pedagogical implications, before implementation.

**Web 2.0: purpose and audience**

*Interviewer:* “How did it feel to be able to use Twitter in the classroom?”

*Paul:* “Good”.

*Jack:* “Cos…you could answer questions that someone else had written from the other side of the world”.

*Interviewer:* “How did it feel to get replies?”

*Andy:* “Good that they’d replied”.

*Jack:* “Because you don’t think that they’re just ignoring you and they’re answering you”.

The group enjoyed the communicative and interactive nature of the platform; being able to send messages globally and receive responses was of particular interest to Ben, who established regular contact with a school in America. The Twitter platform enabled access to a range of real audiences and gave the pupils’ writing a real purpose. Their responses to the affective questions above were positive, voicing that it felt “good” to receive replies to their writing. Therefore, through engaging with their network on Twitter, generating meaningful written discourse, perhaps the boys’ attitudes to writing can be seen to have improved as they enjoyed actively engaging in such activity. Due to the limited size of my case study, I cannot reflect on the generalised benefits the use of Twitter could allow. However, on a wider scale, where real purposes and genuine audiences have been provided for writing, boys’ attitudes and achievements have improved (DCSF, 2009b, p.14; Ofsted, 2009, p.48).

*Andy:* “Cos they can reply back but with Twitter you type it up the top, it goes on to the...you have to wait like 10 minutes...but with Facebook you’ve got the little chat bit”.

However, it became clear that the boys were not particularly enthused with having to wait for a response from their audience, preferring instead the instantaneous, synchronous nature of Facebook Chat (2010) that would have allowed them to reply immediately. Therefore, a
barrier to the possibility of a transformation of the boys’ negative attitudes came in the form of the asynchronous nature of Twitter. Whilst previous research shows blogging and emailing (other forms of asynchronous communication) as having a significant impact on engagement and enjoyment in writing (Davies and Merchant, 2009; Burnett et al., 2006), it seems in this instance, the focus group were almost irritated at having to wait for a reply.

It is not unreasonable to suggest that, considering the boys’ enthusiastic attitudes towards Facebook Chat, implementing the use of such a platform in the classroom could improve the boys’ attitudes to writing. However, Merchant (2007, p.124) discusses the interactions involved in such ‘chat’ as characterised by their ‘spontaneity and informality’ and therefore in the current writing curriculum, their value as a form of writing is limited. Similarly, whilst research has found that children with profiles on SNSs hold more positive attitudes to writing than those without (Clark and Dugdale, 2009, p. 23), in this case the opposite is evident. Although these boys all use SNSs outside of school, their attitudes to writing are consistently negative, even after the utilisation of a social networking platform in school. Perhaps, this is because texts are ‘recontextualised’ (Pahl and Rowsell, 2005, p.50) as they cross boundaries between home and school. Where SNSs were previously held as positive outside of school, their inclusion into the writing curriculum in school has somewhat devalued their use for the boys.

The stresses of handwriting

Interviewer: “When faced with a blank sheet of paper how do you feel?”
Ben: “Gutted…I just feel like…oh no it’s time to…oh no it’s just like…I just literally shut down as in like oh I cant do this, like I get embarrassed like to show people my handwriting cos I don’t like it”.

Interviewer: “So you kind of see writing…”
Ben: (Interrupts) “As an enemy”.

One prominent finding from the initial interviews regarding specific barriers to writing for some of the focus group (n=2), related to the transcriptional aspects of writing and in particular handwriting was highlighted as a large factor in Ben’s disengagement. Boys regularly fall behind girls in the area of handwriting (Medwell and Wray, 2008, p.41), and certainly Ben consistently voiced his disappointment at his handwriting, suggesting that he would even attend daily handwriting sessions if they were held at break times. For teachers, this signals a growing conflict in the importance of providing time on traditional forms of handwriting when the ubiquity of the screen is changing popular modes of writing (Kress, 2003).

Interviewer: “So why was it different to writing it on paper?”
Andy: “…some people can’t read our writing”.
Interviewer: “So because of handwriting?”
Paul: “Yeah”.

Following their use of Twitter, the boys highlighted the affordances of the platform in alleviating problems with handwriting, though it is necessary to highlight in the above example, that the intervention of my leading question regarding handwriting, could have signalled an artificial answer from Paul. Whilst there was no direct evidence that this factor had improved the boys’ attitudes, the differences between on-screen and paper-based writing
were discussed as beneficial to Andy’s perceived achievement, as his writing became easily legible. It is important to recognise that Twitter is not directly relatable to this improvement; it is the word-processed nature of the writing, rather than the platform itself. Word processing has long been found to signal positive changes in attitude towards the mechanical aspects of writing (Peacock and Najarian, 1993, p.69). However, whilst word processing empowered them to confidently access their writing ability, there are substantial beneficial links between handwriting and composition (Medwell et al., 2009) that call for handwriting to be a firmly established skill in the boys’ writing.

Concepts of writing

It was clear that the Internet played an important part in the boys’ home lives; they were all active and prolific users of SNSs, in particular Facebook, which they were primarily using to play games on and to ‘chat’ with friends and family. The boys spoke with enthusiasm and understanding about their use of these platforms and held immensely positive attitudes towards them. The practice of interacting on Facebook was related to ‘chatting’ and it was not immediately realised as writing. However upon realisation, the boys highlighted that writing of this nature would not be recognised in school. National data details children’s frequency of, and increase in, their use of SNSs (Ofcom 2009; 2008) and young people value the communicative affordances of new technologies and online platforms (Youthnet, 2009, p.4). However, as my research has signalled, the dissonance between children’s home-school literacy practices (Carrington, 2005) is still evident as such texts are not valued in school curricula. Perhaps this is because such exchanges regularly ignore standard rules of language (Maranto and Barton, 2009, p.37) that are at the heart of the traditional educational concept of writing.

Interviewer: “So did you like using Twitter?”
All: “Yeah” (straight away).
Interviewer: “OK, why?”
Andy: “Because it’s getting out of writing”.
Paul: “And work”.
Andy: (Laughing) “Yeah”.

The boys detailed their excitement at being involved in the project, however, their excitement came from the privilege of using the platform in the classroom, rather than the writing tasks they were involved in. Instead, they believed it was exciting and enjoyable as it meant they could avoid having to write and do other work in the classroom. With this evidence, the writing practice involved in using Twitter in this study can be seen as almost ‘hidden’ behind a façade of communication. However, in order to see an improvement in attitude, the boys need to realise these online communicative practices - that they enjoy both at home and school - are in fact writing practices.

Interviewer: “How do you feel about writing now?”
Andy: “Still not amazing...no one can read my writing...not for me”.
Interviewer: “So you still don’t like writing...or...?”
Jack: (Interrupts) “I don’t think I ever will”.

None of the boys’ attitudes to writing had improved as a result of the use of Twitter, with Andy highlighting again the issues he faced with transcriptional accuracy. There was a clear
sense throughout the project that the boys’ negative attitudes to in-school writing were predominantly associated with the secretarial aspects of handwriting, and it was evident that they did not associate their use of communicative technology with writing. Research has found similar disassociations in American teenagers who hold clear distinctions between what constitutes in-school and out-of-school writing (Pew Internet, 2008). The concept of writing in school can be seen as a ‘systematic ambiguity’ (Barton, 2007, p.19) in that there is often a conflict between the values of transcription and composition in what makes a ‘good’ writer. Currently, these boys consider accurate and neat transcription as the main focus of successful writing and therefore hold negative attitudes towards writing, considering themselves unsuccessful in this area.

Conclusions and implications

This study has explored the potential of incorporating a popular social networking platform into school literacy practice, with a focus on transforming boys’ negative attitudes to in-school writing. The use of Twitter in school has not been found to significantly transform the negative attitudes of the boys in this focus group, though in considering the evidence for such lack of change, important issues surrounding boys’ writing in our digital world have been raised.

In order to narrow the gap between the attainment of girls and boys in writing, boys’ attitudes need to be raised. Whilst we have seen the boys were engaged by the global audience Twitter allowed for, and consequently enthused in the discourse they initiated, it was clear from their responses that they did not recognise such as writing. Therefore, that writing was almost ‘hidden’ behind communicative interactions on Twitter is the most significant finding of my study. Potentially, Twitter has the possibility to stimulate and reengage disaffected attitudes in boys as it offers communicative literacy practices similar to those actively negotiated by children at home. However, the concept of in-school writing for these boys is still firmly set in the handwritten nature of classroom writing, which has been signalled by all except Jack, as fundamental to their negative attitudes.

For schools, the ‘major challenge is to reinvigorate writing practice and theory to increase engagement and to improve standards’ (DCSF, 2008b, p.5). Recognising new forms of communicative digital writing in school could begin to transform the attitudes of the boys in this focus group; however, in terms of implications for wider practice, any conclusions are limited in their ability to generalise due to the small and subjective nature of this study. Nevertheless, it is crucial for schools to begin to utilise forms of writing children engage with outside school, if children are to realise writing as ‘an essential life skill’ (Clark and Dugdale, 2009, p.38). The boys in my study did not recognise their out-of-school literacy practice on SNSs as valued in school, and are perhaps ‘disadvantaged’ (Lankshear and Knobel, 2003, p.179) because of this. If their attitudes are to improve, both children and schools must recognise such practice as writing and realise its importance in their lives.

This will require a ‘reconceptualisation’ (Merchant, 2007, p.126) of writing that reflects changing modes of writing in our current technological world (Kress, 2003), and recognises children as ‘active participants’ in changing literacy practice out of school (Reedy, 2010). Therefore, Twitter could transform boys’ negative attitudes, if it was actively utilised in school writing practice. The fundamental question raised by this research in terms of pedagogical implications regards how to effectively capitalise on the use of SNSs such as Twitter in classroom writing practice. In order to answer this question thoroughly, more in-
depth exploration into specific uses of the platform needs to occur and more exploratory research carried out on a wider scale.

As primary education approaches the horizon of change and we look forward to the possibility of a new curriculum, teachers will be offered more ‘flexibility’ in tailoring classroom pedagogy to the pupils they teach (DCSF, 2009a, p.71). This will open up new possibilities with regards to the use of SNSs in the writing curriculum and will perhaps allow for a wider concept of writing to be recognised in the educational domain. However, documentation alone will not be enough to close the ‘gap’ between the differing sites of children’s writing practice. Instead, it will require teachers and educators to be cognizant of the important role new literacies play in children’s lives and to embrace this within their classroom practice. Certainly, I have become aware of this as a result of this study and my commitment to the exploration of the role of new literacies is of personal interest in my own practice.

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