























Figure 1. Markus's rhyming couplets poem                      To mature more is much near

As a precursor to creating this poem, the students were asked to use the web-based learning tool, skool.ie, to read and analyze W. B. Yeats's poem "When You Are Old." This new media tool allowed the students time to reflect on the aging and maturation process through its guiding and interactive functions, while also demonstrating the rhyming couplets rhyme scheme. The new media tools used in the study, such as skool.ie, engaged Markus, as he explained in his interview that he found it was easy to express himself using poetic language, devices, and this rhyming form in particular. The multimedia tools and the poetry format allowed him the creative space to explore his poetic voice and reflect on his own maturation limbo that he recognized in himself as a new Grade 9 student.

**The interview.** Another turning point we witnessed was in Markus's post-project interview where he shared what he learned about himself from the project, what insights he gleaned about the identity-construction and voice-finding processes from engaging with new media, social media, and the poetry-writing process. When asked if he learned anything about himself from the project, he shared that he was he was able to reconnect with a poetic voice he had not used in a while, but one that he valued: "I used to actually write a little bit of poetry when I was younger. I kind of found...myself, you know, kind of liking poetry again, which was pretty nice. I feel a little bit more calm, relaxed" (December 19<sup>th</sup>, 2012). This affirmed for us the value of using poetry to help guide the students through the identity-reflection process because the creative expression inherent in poetry provides a unique space for students to connect with the poet that exists in everyone; poetic language is everywhere and part of the human psyche (Brady, 2009), but may be dormant. Once Markus had reconnected with his poetic voice, allowing him the agency to express himself, he reported feeling more "calm, relaxed" (December 19<sup>th</sup>, 2012).

Furthermore, when it came to the technology, Markus admitted to enjoying the intersection of new media tools, social media, and the poetry unit. He said, "I really enjoyed the tablets, like I enjoyed how you can record the poems, and, like the video, and the audio...[Regarding] social media, I think not many people for actual class work can actually go on Facebook and Twitter" (December 19<sup>th</sup>, 2012). Markus played around with the recording features of the tablets and was able to use them to record audio and video versions of his poems, particularly the spoken word poem. This was unique as the new media literally allowed the students' voices to be projected. Markus found agency in the control he was able to exert over the rhythm and pacing of his poem when he performed or recorded it on the tablet. By the end of the six weeks, it was obvious that Markus had found a new way to express himself and a new literate voice in which he felt a sense of power and agency—two important elements in an adolescents' process of identity construction.

### **Case Study 2: "I Want People to See Both Sides of Me"**

Jane was another student in whom we witnessed a similar transformational process. Jane was a conscientious student and very intelligent; however, at the beginning of the project she did not stand out as an outspoken or particularly confident individual. As the poetry unit progressed, however, and as she had opportunity to share her thoughts, opinions, and knowledge through her poetry and through our in-class discussions on identity, a more assertive and self-assured voice emerged.

**The post-survey.** When asked on her post-survey, “Do you now feel technology can help students develop their sense of identity? If so, how?” Jane responded, “I feel technology can help students develop their sense of identity because they can explore their utmost personality in different aspects” (December 20<sup>th</sup>, 2012). Jane appreciated the multimodal affordances of the new media tools, which can help students express themselves in a variety of ways. For instance, the tablets allowed the students to combine text with speech and images in order to respond to tasks and poetry-writing assignments in class. Jane went on to explain that social media can help students to “show themselves as a whole not just one aspect of their personality. They become their true selves or they become the opposite of how they are” (December 20<sup>th</sup>, 2012). After our concentrated exploration through poetry of how one edits and constructs his or her personal profiles on social networking sites, this was the conclusion Jane came to. By the end of the project, she had begun to develop a critical eye toward the messages she both receives and produces in digital social spaces. She elaborates on how social networking sites can aid in the identity-development process by explaining:

The activity online helps you express who you are and what you are like to others because you can only show one aspect of your personality for example some people are very social and outgoing. But in the real world you could be a very shy person. So activity online helps us express who we are but only to a certain extent. (December 20<sup>th</sup>, 2012)

**The poem.** While Jane, like Markus, appeared to be an insightful student, her voice developed differently over the course of the project. Where Markus’s focus was on his personal maturation process, Jane explored her interest in political issues and developed her social justice voice through the poetry writing assignments. This is demonstrated most fully in the following found poem:

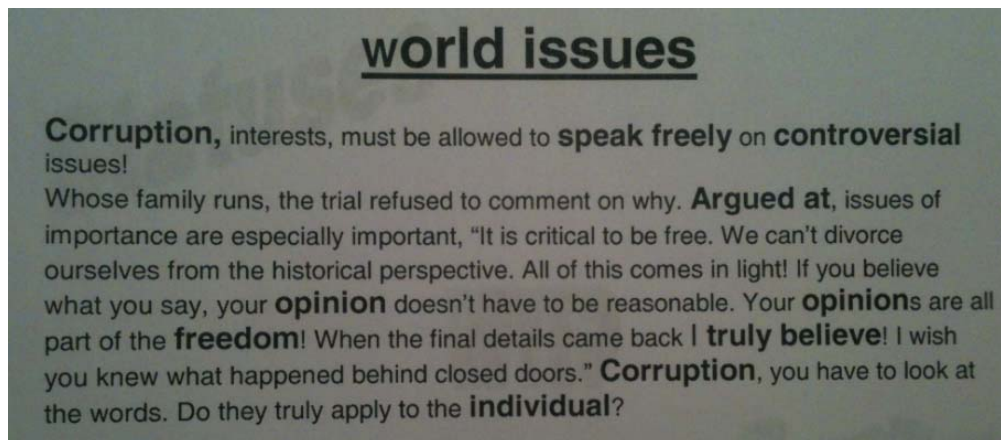


Figure 2. Jane’s found poem.

Much of the other work done in this grade nine class had little to do with politics, so Jane had not had the opportunity to express this side of her personality in the classroom. The poetry unit allowed her to merge her out-of-school interests and literary practices with her in-school assignments, by using new media, such as the Internet, to find inspiration and simultaneously explore and analyze the information she is exposed to most often in her digital practices.

**The interview.** By the end of the project, Jane was attuned to the various identities she had constructed in her life and what has impacted the development of these identities. Unlike the majority of the students in the class, when asked how many identities she had, she confidently responded by saying: “I would say around four,” having taken the time during the poetry unit to reflect on all of them. In an informal conversation, she elaborated on what these identities were: one identity for friends, one for family, one identity as a student, and one for social media. This awareness is important as it ultimately translates to a strong sense of self and agency.

### **Case Study 3: “Online or in Real Person...I’m Very the Same”**

On the other end of the spectrum was one student (Anita) who stood out for her staunch rejection of the idea that individuals have multiple identities and that factors such as new media or social media could play a role in the identity-construction process. Anita was a very social and bubbly student in the classroom. She was clearly well-liked by her peers, but not exceptionally critical when it came to analyzing the poetry in class or peeling back the layers involved in the identity-construction process.

What was particularly interesting was that this student completed all the assignments and wrote all the required poems to a satisfactory, if not high standard, unlike some of the other students who did not understand or “buy into” the premise of the research/study unit. This indicated for the research team that there was still a lack of self-awareness between the development of the students’ literate identities and their ability to be critical consumers and producers of texts.

**The post-survey.** On her post-survey, Anita demonstrated that she had been unmoved in her opinion of identity construction. When asked, “Do you feel technology can help students develop their sense of identity? If so, how?” She responded with a straightforward, “No.” Similarly, when asked, “Do you feel social networking sites such as Facebook or Twitter can help you develop online identities that help you grow? If yes, please explain.” Again, she responded with a resounding and singular, “No.” This was an interesting finding and it highlighted the need to include identity construction as it relates to new and social media in the curriculum and to investigate further, why students feel this way about their online identity. It is clearly an important issue and there is evidently a need to bring students’ awareness to this issue in order to help them consciously create positive selves—armed with the awareness of what factors influence the development of one’s identity, for the better or worse.

**The poem.** Although Anita did not believe that technology, new media, or social media could help develop a student’s identity, she engaged in all the poetry writing and reflection activities and created a lighthearted, yet telling, poetic voice throughout the unit. This can be seen in her poem entitled, “What I am”:

**What I am**

I am young  
I am fun  
I like to shop  
I like to drink pop

You are old  
You are NOTE bold  
You don't spend money  
You are not funny

I am teen  
I am lean  
I love to gossip  
I like gloss on my lip

You are forty  
You are not a party  
You like the news  
You wear comfy shoes

I don't get up till ten  
I what TV in the den  
I do my nails  
I look for sales

I am what I am  
You are what you are  
We are what we are  
No one can change that

*Figure 3.* Anita's rhyming couplets poem.

Anita, along with other students who did not understand the convergence of social media, new media and identity construction, was still willing to explore the topic of identity through a unit on poetry. She, like other students, indicated that she appreciated the creativity involved in writing poetry and was able to develop a distinct poetic voice during the project, drawing on her literate identity, part of which is constructed in her out-of-school new and social media practices. In retrospect more work should have been done with students such as Anita to help them make this connection in order to help them develop critical awareness.

**The interview.** In her post-project interview (December 19<sup>th</sup>, 2012), she explained how she enjoyed the poetry unit, but echoed the firm beliefs previously expressed on her survey. When asked, “*What did you like or dislike about the poetry unit?*” She explained that she “liked the creative element” and that she “liked being able to communicate in a different way than we normally do in school.” This was similar to what both Markus and Jane communicated in their post-project feedback—explaining that they enjoyed using the multimodal media tools and using the creative format of poetry to explore and express themselves. Anita appreciated that there was an intersection of her out-of-school literary practices and her in-school literary practices in this project. This indicated that part of her engagement in the poetry, part of the reason she bought into the poetry unit, was because new and social media tools added a fresh dimension that spoke

to her out-of-school literate identity. She confessed to learning something new about herself through the unit, saying “I learned that I like, I just like writing poetry now because I like expressing myself through that.” So, she was able to explore and develop her identity, however, by the end of the study, she was still unable to see the connection between new media and social media and one’s process of identity construction.

At one point in the interview, Anita offered that the new media tools helped her discover a part of her identity and present her poetic voice: “I liked [the tablets] because it was different from presenting it to the class and you can like do different things and not be embarrassed about how you sound or the way that you look.” However, when asked again in the interview if she learned “*anything about your different identities?*” She held firm with: “Not really, I’m kind of the same.” Even when questioned on social networking sites and if they might help one develop his/her identity, she retorted with: “No, not at all...because it’s the Internet and it’s just, it’s just there. It doesn’t really do anything. I guess it’s been there my whole life. It’s not really a big [deal].” This was an important and telling statement, as it highlighted for the research team how close millennial students are to new and social media—they are so intertwined with these cultural tools that some may not have the distance necessary to see how the tools might shape identity construction. It is very difficult to be a critical consumer and producer when one is proximally so close.

### Conclusion

The study made clear that new/multimedia and social media were powerful tools for engaging this group of students in the reflective poetry-writing process. The multimodality of the new media tools honoured the students’ out-of-school literacy practices and allowed them to express themselves in ways that were comfortable, familiar, and/or to express things that could not simply be captured in the written word. Furthermore, incorporating the inherently reflective structure of a social networking site, which logs one’s online social history, helped facilitate the identity-reflection and exploration processes.

However, the study also highlighted the fact that over 50% of the students in both classes were largely unaware of their multiple identities, particularly the differences in their online and offline selves, and how these selves were constructed. Through this, we discovered that most of the adolescents in these classes were operating blindly in their online activities; unaware of how their social literacy practices affected their identity development. Weber and Mitchell (2008) remind us that identity construction is a fluid process that “constantly sheds bits and adds bits, changing through dialectical interactions with the digital and non-digital world, involving physical, psychological, social and cultural agents” (43). As a result, moving forward, we see an urgent need to incorporate online identity construction and critical digital literacies into the curriculum in order to help adolescents develop positive online and offline identities, equipped with agency and critical thinking skills.

The poetic inquiry methodology enabled the research team to connect with the students’ work on a new, metacognitive level where we were writing our own poetry based on the students’ poetry. As we incorporated their words and phrases into our own work, we felt a deeper connection to, and insight into, their cognitive and writing processes. In the following research poem, all the words and phrases were taken from student-generated poems and were arranged to

communicate the chaos and confusion, and yet the hopefulness, the researcher experienced at one point in the study:

Life is a carnival  
But She just doesn't get it  
He just doesn't get it  
But  
Impossible is nothing.

Using their words and voices, the research team was able to gain better insight into the students' inner landscapes and emotions. Where we may have otherwise glossed over certain words and phrases, incorporating the students' work into our own poetry gave us time to reflect on what the students were trying to communicate through their poems.

Furthermore, writing poetry after each day encouraged us to reflect on what had transpired in the classroom, during the teaching and learning process. It was an engaging and therapeutic way of gaining perspective as we recorded what went wrong, what worked, and what needed to change for future lessons and projects. Writing the poetry also helped us reflect on the writing process for the students. While it was relatively easy for the researchers to sit down and write, taking the time to do this allowed us the space to consider how challenging it might be for some of the students to write poetry. We realized that more scaffolding and support was necessary to facilitate the writing process.

To conclude, in our experience, when steps were taken to show students how their online social practices help shape their online and offline identities, we were met with resistance from many. From this, we reasoned that for these students, their digital and physical worlds have become so intertwined that they do not possess the emotional or philosophical distance necessary to internalize this "big-picture" concept. As a result, we see room for future studies to examine how best to include the exploration of online identity construction in the English classroom in order to discourage the "disembodied user" (Subrahmanyam & Smahel, 2012) and develop critically and digitally literate adolescents.



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