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Blogging and Tweeting and Chat, Oh My! Social Networks, Classroom Culture, and Foreign Language Instruction

Thomas Garza

Introduction: The Age of the Cyber-Student

The first decade of the 21st century has witnessed an unprecedented global explosion in the number of online social networking sites (SNSs) available to anyone with a computer and an Internet connection. SNSs, such as Facebook, LiveJournal, MySpace, Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn, Bebo, and SixDegrees, among scores of others¹, have transformed the mode and medium of person-to-person communication, by making instant, direct – and free – contact with tens of thousands of interlocutors at one time a reality. A 2007 study of the National School Boards Association showed that American school-age children were spending nine to twelve hours per week not simply on the computer, but specifically on social networking sites – about the same amount of time as they spent watching television (Karlin, 1). Significantly, according to more recent research, that number increases to fifteen to twenty hours per week for university students, according to the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, nearly twice the average time per week that a college student spends studying and preparing for classes (Deresiewicz, 2).

In the past year, the authors of *Online Social Networking on Campus Understanding What Matters in Student Culture*, Ana Martínez Alemán and Katherine Wartman, claimed that “Higher Education professionals should recognize that online social networking sites like Facebook are part of a larger generational development in computer mediated communication that epitomizes most students on our campuses today.” (67). As Alemán and Wartman further responded in an interview on the subject of students and computer-mediated communication:

“College students use these sites to engage socially in a manner that is not conceptualized as ‘virtual’ and thus not ‘real’, but rather as a digital exchange of cultural norms and their

¹ The popular user-edited encyclopedia website, Wikipedia, lists no fewer than 194 SNSs, from “academia.edu” to “Zooppa.com,” on its entry “Social Networking Sites.” See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_social_networking_websites.

transgressions broadly conceived. Communication that is exchanged on Facebook, for example, is understood by students as ‘real’ with a complex web of rules that guide playful misrepresentation, for example” (Jaschik 2).

Such a claim is crucial to understanding both the extent to which students are willing to reveal certain things – sometimes very personal details – about themselves and about their lives to an open, mostly un-moderated, cyberspace that almost anyone in the world with a computer can freely access, and the amount of time they are willing to devote to these activities as part of their daily life experience. Given that popular SNSs have quickly become multimedia venues in which users can add text (in a wide and growing variety of international alphabets), photos, sound, video, or even stream live video, it was only a matter of time before the use of these sites would become the leading means of student interaction on and off campus. Indeed, initial forays into the use of social media, notably Twitter and Facebook, in foreign language and culture classes at the University of Texas are already being implemented and are discussed in this work.

The extensive use of these SNSs globally cannot be overemphasized in the larger picture of world culture and current events. The 2008 election of Barack Obama as President of the United States, as well of many other political figures in the U.S. Congress and state and local governments, was facilitated and reported to a large extent via social network sites such as Facebook and Twitter, which informed, persuaded, and mobilized large numbers of American voters, especially younger voters, to go to the polls in November 2008, and once again in 2010. In an age of political apathy, the inclusion of such popular modes of communication and networking proved to be a much-needed impetus to move record numbers of young Americans to political action – on their terms.

The use of SNSs for political purposes is not limited to the U.S. Who can forget the striking images in the global media of massive protests in Iran during the 2009 presidential elections, or the even more recent demonstrations on Tahrir Square in Cairo, Egypt, which ultimately led to the resignation of former president Hosni Mubarak and the establishment of new government? Both of these events were largely organized and conducted remotely on SNSs; in particular, via Twitter. Such use facilitated both far-reaching communication and calls for action and organization, while maintaining the anonymity of its users. It is doubtful that the mass gatherings of protestors and international press at these remotely organized protest meetings all over Tehran and the surrounding areas

would have been possible at all without the facilitation of social networks as a means of instantaneous, widespread, and anonymous communication. Such specialized uses – and their subsequent outcomes – are hallmarks of a technology and a medium that can change the face of our societies, our cultures, and our world. Given such potential impact, imagine the potential effect such media might have on the process and products of education around the world.

The Darker Side of the Cyber World

In the extended global community of the new millennium, the need to be and stay connected to one another seems to have risen to the forefront of world consciousness. In the U.S., there was without a doubt a palpable rise in this sentiment following the attacks of 9/11, in which millions of lives from around the world, literally, were at stake, and the need to be in immediate communication with others became of paramount importance. However, between the ubiquitous use of cellular telephones – especially the growing number of “smart” phones – and the Internet, it seems that SNS use in the last five years has taken on a somewhat different importance. No longer merely a means of being or staying in touch, online SNSs now replace much of social interaction that was previously the domain of face-to-face contact in our cultures. The act of “hooking up,” or making a connection, online has become shorthand in our students’ parlance for the larger world of “cyber-dating” in our university culture. Entire relationships can be initiated, conducted, and ended online, eliminating the need for actual face-to-face human contact. William Deresiewicz, for example, comments: “With the social networking sites of the new century, the friendship circle has expanded to engulf the whole of the social world, and in so doing, destroyed both its own nature and that of the individual friendship itself” (8).

Further, some students have taken online dating to the next extreme level of soft-core pornography through posting inappropriate photographs or other materials, and through “sexting,” the sending of instant messages with embedded provocative-to-pornographic photographs into cyberspace. These images sometimes find themselves onto dubious websites, well beyond the scope of social networks. Indeed, the laws in many states are finding it difficult to keep up with the changing face of online interaction and communication, while not violating the First Amendment right to freedom of speech.

The appearance of such inappropriate materials on SNSs has become an unfortunate feature of university cyber culture in the 2000s, to such an extent that some universities, such as American University in Washington, D.C., have added

dedicated institutional websites to combat the inappropriate use or exploitation of SNSs for illegal or improper purposes. Further, since many legitimate future employers and educational providers also now turn to SNSs to get a more complete profile of a potential employee or student, American University gives its students advice on how to “de-tag,” or remove questionable material from one’s personal pages on SNSs, including an admonition on the hubristic posting of dubious photos on oneself on one’s personal pages: “Consider the image your postings project. What would a prospective employer think of you? A scholarship awards committee? De-tag or remove inappropriate pictures of yourself.” Another warns:

Watch what you say and post about others. False statements can subject you to charges of defamation or libel; photos posted without someone's knowledge and consent can be construed as an ‘invasion of privacy.’ Generally, follow the ‘Golden Rule’ – Treat others as you want to be treated (See “Saving Face: Face Saving Tips,” 1).

Ironically, the very cyber-medium that first purported to liberate the student from the physical constraints of interacting with his or her peers was now at the center of controversy in facilitating illegal use of the Internet, to the detriment of some of its users.

Questioning the Effect of SNSs on University Academic Performance

Further, a growing number of U.S. educators are now concerned that the skyrocketing rise in use of the SNSs of its university students will certainly lead to a corresponding proportionate drop in academic performance. At the very least, they worry that students will simply find less time to concentrate on their studies, due to the attractive alternative of being online with friends. Indeed, Aryn Karpinsky of Ohio State University conducted a study that suggests those students who used Facebook on a regular basis had overall lower grade point averages than those who did not. Further, the study concluded that overall academic performance was lower for over half of the students surveyed who use the SNS. Some students in this limited survey actually used the term “addiction” to describe their relationship to Facebook in their daily lives, being unable to go through an entire day without checking in online with their friends on the site (Karpinsky 2 - 3).

Very recent research, however, adds a different, seemingly contradictory, dimension to the growing indications that activity on SNSs such as Facebook has

no adverse impact on academic performance, and might indeed have certain developmental advantages in terms of a student's ability to interact with his peers. One study conducted at Northwestern University on one thousand students at the University of Illinois at Chicago found no connection between the amount of time spent online on SNSs, such as Facebook and MySpace, and academic performance (Truong). Northwestern University researcher, Eszter Hargittai, states that the benefits of using social-networking sites might cancel out the distractions they pose:

You could go on there and waste your time. On the other hand, you can connect with your classmates, get information about homework assignments, get to know people better, and feel more comfortable engaging with them on academic matters (Truong, 1).

Another current study suggests that SNS use might actually be expanding the opportunities and the means for college students to interact in an increasingly large sphere of personal communication. In his 2010 survey of over nine hundred current college students and recent college graduates across the U.S., professor of media studies at the University of Texas, S. Craig Watkins, reports that their findings indicate that Facebook is actually *not* replacing face-to-face interactions that students have with friends, family, and colleagues. Watkins states, "In fact, we believe there is sufficient evidence that social media afford opportunities for new expressions of friendship, intimacy and community" (1). He contends:

Whereas engagement with Facebook four years ago was principally about connecting to a small sphere of friends, the use of the platform today includes a broader range of activities, such as communicating with friends and family, collaborating on school work, browsing photos and videos, playing games and quizzes, consuming news, and participating in civic life (1).

Watkins also offers some evidence to support the use of the Facebook platform for intercultural and international communication. As he reports on the actions of the students in his research:

When asked about the type of communication they engage in on Facebook, forty-seven percent of survey participants cited their communication with friends who live in a different state or country as 'very important,' while 28 percent cited

communicating with friends who live in the same city as 'very important.' Thirty-five percent of survey participants cited communicating with family members, such as parents, aunts and uncles, as very important' (2).

This "softening" image of Facebook among other SNSs in regard to its impact on the academic and social lives of students raises new questions about the efficacy of using these social media in the classroom. Five years ago, such a discussion of increasing SNS use would have seemed to be anathema to academic success in the university setting. However, with growing evidence that there is no causal link between SNS activity and poor academic performance, the potential for incorporating social networking sites into course curricula is becoming a reality, especially in view of their remarkable presence in other spheres of current events and public discourse.

SNSs in the American Classroom

Interestingly, a growing number of experts in the area of SNSs use and education, such as Alemán and Wartman, indicate precisely such a trend in education:

SNS will become an instructional tool soon. Facebook has already partnered with a course management system; some faculty have begun to use Facebook groups to foster peer learning, conduct group projects, etc. Computer mediated technologies have already made it necessary for academic faculty to modify or simply transfer traditional modes and norms of real-life academic and pedagogical communication online." (Jaschik 5).

Certainly, this view is supported by the increasing trend in the U.S. educational culture to incorporate into their courses online management systems, such as Blackboard, WebCT, Virtual-U and Learning Space, to deliver course content materials ranging from course syllabi to lecture notes, to keeping attendance records, and handling student communications. In fact, SNSs have already begun to be incorporated into our university courses at all levels, bringing the technology and the culture of the sites to our day-to-day classroom operations.

My own recent classroom experience in attempting to turn this seemingly unstoppable tide of our students' incessant use of social networking technology –

even *during* class – began after a conversation with another foreign language colleague of mine, who was commiserating with me over the growing lack of students' attention in our larger classes due to the use of the Internet during class. In particular, we were deriding the relative newcomer to the social networking family: an instant messaging and posting site called Twitter. While we both joked that any format for personal communication that reduced normal conversation to telegraphic utterances of only 140 characters, called "tweets," signaled the certain demise of Western civilization, my colleague half seriously suggested that the only way we might ever change the culture of the new American classroom was to begin to use this kind of technology as part of our instruction. As we both laughed at this suggestion, I suddenly wondered aloud, "Why not?" My colleague countered with, "You could use it during your larger lectures to see what students are thinking!" Suddenly, the seemingly ludicrous idea became a genuine pedagogical challenge: Could it actually work? Could a social networking device become an instrument for pedagogical innovation in a standard large lecture classroom?

That same semester, in spring 2009, I was halfway through the term of teaching a large lecture course on science fiction in Soviet and Russian literature and film to a group of nearly one hundred undergraduates at the University of Texas. At the beginning of class, I broached the idea by first asking how many of them used Twitter on a regular basis. About half of the class answered affirmatively. When I then asked how many used their computers to send emails or instant messages during my class, nearly all raised their hands, without embarrassment or hesitation. I then asked if they would like to participate in an experiment in using the social networking site Twitter during class as a way of commenting on the content of the material being presented and asking questions; nearly every student's hand went up. Before the next class meeting, I set up a Twitter account for the class, and began my lecture with a brief explanation of the process. The basic rules for using Twitter in my class were simple: No profanity or obscenities could be used, and no personal attacks on other students or their comments could be made. Students could comment on any part of the lecture: the lecture itself, the slides, the film clips, or the music that I presented during the class or as part of any homework assignment. The auditorium in which I taught was equipped with two projection screens, so I dedicated one of them to the Twitter page so that students could read each other's comments in real time throughout the entirety of the class. The lights went down, and then we began.

The lecture that first day was on Andrei Tarkovsky's film *Stalker* and the Strugatsky Brothers' original story "Roadside Picnic," which inspired the cinematic adaptation. I preceded the beginning of the lecture with a short clip from the film in which the main characters enter "The Zone" for the first time. As the film was playing, immediately comments began to appear on the Twitter site, which I could read in the dark. Some of the original student comments included: "Creepy. Reminds me of Mad Max," wrote one student. "Doesn't the Zone mean something in Russian?" another added. "Why doesn't anyone shave in these movies?" Responding to one of the earlier tweets, yet another student responded, "It's more depressing than Mad Max, more like Solzhenitsyn." And as the clip came to an end, one student opined, "What's up with the blue filter the director's using??" And so they went; the flow of tweets on the screen was about five to ten every minute, more than five times the numbers of questions that I might get after an entire lecture, much less after a single film segment.

By the end of the four-minute clip, I was ready to start my planned lecture, but I had in front of me a strange new kind of informed entry to the material I had planned to talk about. Any fear I had that I would not be able to cover the material that I had planned disappeared instantly. Not only was I able to say everything that was already in my lecture notes, but I could adjust my comments to respond directly to the students' postings in real time. As expected, a few of the postings were meant only to be humorous, others missing the point of the material entirely; but the majority of comments were germane and interesting commentaries or questions on the film, many of which would never have been expressed in the typical way of responding to the usual request for "Questions?" at the end of every class.

The comments the students made carried a great deal of substance and served as content organizers for my lectures. I honestly can say that I never really changed the basic content or message of my lectures, but found that I was able to craft them in to tailor-made disquisitions that fit the general associations that the class was bringing to the topic. This revelation was possibly the most striking for me in my experiment; I had been concerned that my lectures might become diffuse and disorganized as I tried to respond in real time to the plethora of questions and commentaries for the students. Instead, I found that the comment only helped me to focus my delivery on the very ideas and arguments that the students themselves had in mind. The addition of Twitter had actually *facilitated* my own presentation of the course content in a way that I believe improved the students' comprehension of the material.

In fall 2009, I used the same technique of incorporating Twitter throughout the entirety of my larger 150-person course on the vampire myth in Slavic cultures, which is actually more of an introduction to Slavic civilization, religion, history, literature, and film than an exegesis on vampires and vampirism. In this class, in spite of the significantly larger size, students used the dedicated Twitter site with great frequency and enthusiasm. (See Figure 1 for additional comments from the actual class.)

While such attempts to use SNSs in a truly academic setting may appear to be purely acquiescent – giving in to popular student habits of their social culture – I contend that these efforts to use social networking media may be the best way to win back the integrity of our lecture halls, and to combat a growing tide to cancel smaller language programs due to falling enrollments and lagging funding. As Alemán and Wortman state, “Though not social online media, online course technologies add another dimension to students’ online habits and customs, and explicitly inject faculty into online interactions with students” (6). This assertion is quite correct, and one might further add that without such engagement with our students’ culture, we may lose the ability to teach them as effectively and efficiently. Indeed, in the current economic climate, without the benefits that technology might offer us, we may not have foreign language classes to teach in the near future.

These first experiments have involved courses with substantial cultural content in and about the Slavic and Russian-speaking worlds; the next logical step would be to integrate Twitter and other SNSs in Russian language and culture courses. However, due to the initial Latinate orientation of the Twitter site, the classes had all been conducted in English, and the messaging language used to communicate on Twitter has been English as well. Now that most social media, including Facebook and Twitter, are fully compatible with non-Latinate alphabets, the next step is to see if the use of an interactive SNS would have a similar positive effect in the teaching of a language-based course. Before 2009, such experiments using Twitter in foreign language classes would have been limited to languages with Latinate alphabets, such as English, Spanish, German, and French. But Twitter and most other SNSs have incorporated the use of other character sets, such as Cyrillic, making the use of the medium in a Russian language classroom fully possible. With this added functionality, Twitter now can also be used in language courses and in content courses in the language to facilitate student input, while allowing the instructor to monitor not only the questions and comments raised by the students, but also the quality of the language used. Twitter can now be used both for students-instructor interaction,

as well as student-student interaction – in and after class. Thus, for example, in an advanced conversation course on Russian film conducted in Russian, Twitter could be used not only to survey and monitor student input during a given class session, but also to facilitate group work in class – all in Russian, or to conduct short-answer surveys during class. The limit to such in-language activities are limited only by the creativity of the instructor – and the 140-character limit of the Twitter medium!

“For All Intensive Purposes...” (sic)

If necessity truly is the mother of invention, then the global economic crisis is a godsend for classroom policies and practices. As budgets at the University of Texas tightened, and the maximum number of students in each class increased, language programs found themselves on the horns of a dilemma: find ways to cut costs in the delivery of language instruction – without sacrificing proficiency goals – or risk losing the language entirely from our course offerings. Such dire choices did, however, engender inspired ideas. Harkening back to the ideas of optimizing the teaching and learning of foreign language skills from the 1980s and '90s, Soviet foreign language pedagogues such as Galina Kitajgorodskaja, Efim Passov, and Aleksej Leonitev are once again relevant to the contemporary foreign language classroom.

The old Soviet notion of intensifying classroom instruction with a focus on the exposure of students to authentic multimedia materials from day one of instruction, and orienting instruction on active reception and production of language on communication are at the center of the new iteration of the intensive classrooms being inaugurated in current language classes attempting – at the University of Texas – to fulfill a two-year foreign language requirement in one, while increasing the number of contact hours from the traditional semester classes, and not sacrificing the proficiency gains of a conventional four-semester program of instruction.

The 21st century model of the Intensive Course has changed significantly from its Soviet predecessors, although the fundamental premises of instruction remain the same: make the student the focus of classroom activity, reserve the bulk of grammatical and lexical study for home, and make the classroom environment fully interactive, using realia, authentic texts, and extensive media, including online resources, to facilitate numerous and varied encounters with the language and culture in context. By giving students multiple opportunities and environments to engage with the language, the chance of getting the student to “buy in” to instruction and the intensive methodology is greatly increased. In the

case of Russian, the first such intensive course was offered in fall 2010. Twenty-five students signed up for the course; at the end of the drop-add period in the third week, there were twenty-six students in the course.

Crucial to the success of this Intensive model is a collegial and supportive *esprit de corps* among the students, especially if the number of participants in the course is large. While in-class activities should facilitate the day-to-day interaction of students in the course, the out-of-class use of course-related SNSs, such as a dedicated blog site, is essential. Besides interacting with authentic website material for homework each day, students also have access to a dedicated course blog site, which is set up for peer interaction. Here, users can ask each other questions about class, homework, or any other assignments or materials used in the course. They can use either English or Russian, as they see appropriate, although use of Russian-only significantly increased by the third month of class. For the University of Texas Intensive Russian course, such interaction is provided via a dedicated Facebook page, which allows both the instructor and individual students to post issues, questions, and comments on a wide variety of course-related topics and then to share their responses with all of the other students taking the course. These exchanges can range from simple questions about homework assignments, to much more complex comments on strategies to read a Russian text. [See Figure 2.]

In this first year of what will undoubtedly be an ongoing curricular sea change of adding more and more intensive-format language courses to our offerings, the Russian experiment is going well. Although assessment from the first semester of the intensive program is still underway, some initial indicators are creating a positive portrait of the students' language gains. The first round of pro-achievement assessments and Oral Proficiency Interviews put the twenty-six students in the intensive course significantly ahead of their peers in the "regular" two-semester sequence of first-year Russian. While most students in the intensive class, like other students completing the initial year of instruction, fall into the "Intermediate" (ILR S1) category in their OPI assessment, several other indicators of progress in the language outpace those of the "regular" course students. For example, listening comprehension appears to be better in the intensive group, as does lexical breadth. But most significantly is the affective factor of willingness to speak on the part of the intensive group, even on unfamiliar topics and/or in unfamiliar circumstances. Such communicative ability might serve these students very well, especially in an immersion or study-abroad context. As this initial group enters into its second semester of intensive

instruction, much more data will be collected and presented to document their progress.

Parting Tweets

As foreign language and culture instructors and faculty begin to increasingly understand the potential educational applications of social networking sites and other online resources to enhance their teaching and research, there is every indication that we can actually begin to change the current, predominant ingrained student culture of using these sites for purely social purposes. By appropriating even a portion of the twenty hours a week that students spend online using SMS instead for academic applications, we may actually have the ability to have an impact, if not change completely, the culture of students using Internet services. Given that it is highly unlikely for our students to tire of or discontinue the extensive use of SNSs during their college days, it is now up to us to enjoin the battle on the same cyber field. We must look at these computer sites not as competitors for our students' time and attention, but rather as unlikely allies in our efforts to educate them in increasingly difficult circumstances.

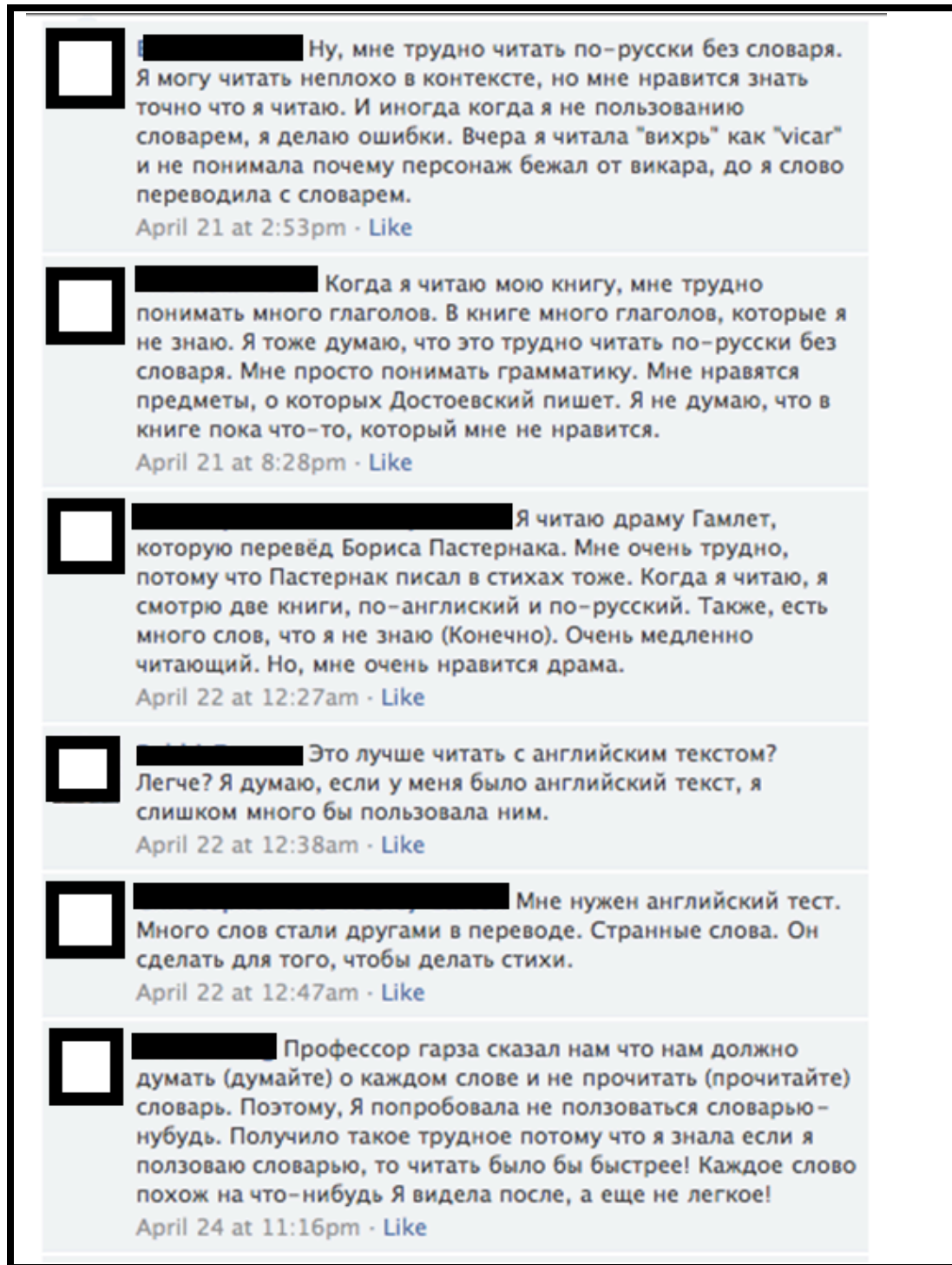
If we return to those prophetic words of Marshall McLuhan and his notion of mass media creating a "global village" in our near future, the explosion of social networking sites in the cyber world of our students has certainly contributed to a new global culture of student life in the U.S., a culture that we as educators must learn to use to our best advantage. Given that more than eighty percent of current Internet users reside outside of the U.S. (*Computer Industry Almanac*), this issue is not only for American foreign language educators, but for everyone. The future of online social networking is being determined as you read this sentence; what that future will look like and how it might change foreign language education is entirely in our hands. *Continued on the next page.*

Figure 1:²



² Names and photographs concealed for privacy considerations.

Figure 2:



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- Figure 1. Actual Page from Class Twitter Site, "The Vampire in Slavic Civilizations," September 29, 2009.