If you’d rather play around on Facebook than write a boring old essay, David Wright is in your corner.

Every year, the Douglas College English instructor gets students in his third-year Modernism course to create a Facebook page for a character from one of the novels they’re studying in the course. David says it gives students a chance to fully immerse themselves in the creation of a persona, much like they do when they create their own Facebook page.

“They have to think: what would this character’s interests be? How would this person update their status, what would they say, and what would that mean?” he says. “That brings out a lot of the contextual info you need to understand character.”

David says the Facebook assignment is a way of teaching students the basics of literary criticism while putting the novels into a world they already understand and engage with.

“It gives them a much clearer sense of character, and what character traits do in developing a level of realism in a character. This is sometimes hard for students to grasp. They come to a book and the characters are, for them, fully formed. They don't necessarily probe into the apparatus of that, which is what the study of English Literaturedoes.”

Though the Facebook assignment is not set to replace the essay any time soon – there are curriculum standards to consider, after all – David says he finds the social media approach far more valuable.

“The students really get into it. I encourage their characters to friend each other, which is really interesting, because they might be from different novels. So you might have Leopold Bloom from James Joyce’s *Ulysses* interacting with Clara from Virginia Woolf’s Jacob’s Room [which novel?] [and how is this type of interaction valuable?]. The interaction between these fictional characters on Facebook might suggest unseen links, such as similar “likes” and dislikes, similar hobbies and interests. All of which helps students grasp the role underlying social, cultural, or aesthetic concerns play in a character’s significance.”

He also says the Facebook assignment – which he offers as a bonus assignment or an exercise worth just a small percentage of the course grade – encourages students to take more risks.

“Most of the time, with an essay, students are trying so hard to please. They're scared of not getting a good grade and so they tend to write what they think I want to see. What the Facebook assignment encourages, because they’re so familiar with Facebook, is getting into the texts without the pressure of a daunting essay format. Students engage with the material in a way that makes sense for them and they’remore daring, looser, as a result. They really see the connections between texts, the similar social, cultural, and aesthetic values, all the stuff Facebook shows us about ourselves and our friends. Students constantly surprise and delight me with the creativity of their character Facebook profiles. I can’t say the same about some of their essays.”

On that note, David says he’d like to see the grading system done away with altogether.   
  
“One thing the Facebook assignment has taught me is that the assigning of grades can crush creativity and learning. Period. Often, when a student is focused on trying to get a good grade, they’re not learninganything but what they need to know to get the good grade. What most students don’t realize is that students who get good grades don’t worry so much about the grade. They spend their time trying to find their voice, they drilldown into the texts and find cool connections, they make the text into something interesting for them. In short, they take risks. The Facebook assignment encourages them to take risks and really think about what the different parts of a novel mean to other parts. It plays up connections and multiple interpretations. Your character’s Facebook profile is a kind of thesis statement. It’s an interpretation of what you think is important to that character and the author who created him/her. As well, there’s immediate feedback on that interpretation. If your wall post has a character doing something they would never do, some “friend” will call you on it right away. The result is that the class learns collaboratively, deciding and defending what’s good or bad about an interpretation.

I still get Facebook birthday notices for Stephen Dedaluses (a character in James Joyce’s Ulysses) from former classes. Sometimes, I check in and the character’s Facebook wall has been updated within the last week and there’s “Happy Birthdays!” from other characters created in former classes. I’ll take that kind of sustained engagement over the dusty essay in the filing cabinet any day.