**Social Media Teaching is No Longer an Elective**

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**Introduction:**

The world is rapidly changing. The growth of the internet coupled with increasingly powerful and portable computers has led to major changes in the way we live our lives. Our connectivity has changed the way we get our information and entertainment. It has changed how we shop, how we receive medical treatment and how we practice our politics. Most significantly it has changed the way we interact with our family, friends, colleagues and the entire online world.

Through Social Media for the first time people have been given a voice that can be heard all over the planet. People have the ability to advocate for changes that they believe are necessary, to criticise injustice when they see it, to converse with experts. But this incredible opportunity also has a cost that it often overlooked. To participate in Social Media a person must make sacrifices. A loss of anonymity is also a loss of privacy. Poor decisions, mistakes made in the heat of the moment may have a lasting impact on an individual’s life, his relationships or job prospects. In the online world we create digital footprints that are difficult if not impossible to erase.

Furthermore, what others say about us is beyond our control. While most people will use their online social capital for good causes, many will not. Some will raise money for charity. Others will cyberbully and harass. Advanced technology has done nothing to improve the moral character of those who use it.

Because of the many risks associated with social networking, some educational institutions have sought to limit students’ access and use of social networking sites. This is not a solution. Schools have an obligation to prepare students for their futures. Given the primacy of computers in our everyday life, the convenience and influence of social networking sites, students must be given access to the online world and an inevitable part of their learning must be education on the risks and rewards of establishing an online presence.

**The Importance of Social Media**

The term “Social Media” refers to online applications that allow users to publish information about themselves and create profiles which serves as a “virtual” presence. These sites allow users to promote their own ideas or comments, share articles, pictures, websites and videos. Depending on the nature of the site, users can share these thigs with just their friends and acquaintances or with the entire world. Social media includes social networking sites such as Facebook and Linkedin, microblogs like Twitter, photo sharing like Snapchat and Instagram, video sharing like Youtube and curation tools like Pinterest.

According to Kemp, more than 45% of all Canadians are active on social media. This group reports that it spends in excess of two hours per day engaged with Social Media sites. This is slightly ahead of the global average reported by Jason Mander (2015) which sat at 1.72 hours per day. More significantly, none of these numbers are static.

In each of the preceding three years the global average of time spent online has increased. One of the drivers of this is still-increasing levels of engagement with social networks, which have climbed from a daily average of 1.61 to 1.72 hours over the period in question. Micro-blogs have risen too, now typically capturing 0.81 hours per day. As a share of the time we spend online, these engagement figures mean that social networking now accounts for almost 30% of our daily internet activities (Mander 2015).

People are increasingly devoted to the technology and are embracing it in ever increasing numbers. And as more people go online, being online becomes less a luxury and more of a necessity. As Taylor (2011) puts it: "In a country as connected as Canada, adequate broadband is a major criterion for equity and inclusion in Canadian society" (1).

Not everyone, however, has been invited to the party. In the online world as in life there are those that have and those that have not and the gulf between is known as the “Digital Divide”. According to CBC News as recently as 2011 almost 1 in 5 Canadians had little to no access online. Almost half of these, 46%, belonged to the lowest income quarter (CBC, 2011). Unfortunately, it is those most in need of a change in circumstance who are least able to affect change due to their disadvantages. As Hicks and Turner explain “we know that students in areas without access to tools of technology and the Internet will struggle to participate economically and politically" (Hicks and Turner).

Unfortunately, well-meaning teachers can exacerbate the digital divide. As Hengstler reports “Lower-income students often receive less instructional access at school, since poorer schools are under the greatest pressure to raise scores on state tests that do not include any online new literacies (Henry 2007). As a result, poorer students may be doubly disadvantaged when it comes to new literacies learning;”

Students from all backgrounds need access online, but it is especially important for children from disadvantaged homes. Hicks & Turner (2013) advise, "In the districts where technology and access are not readily available and community resources are slim, teachers need to work extremely hard to make sure that their students are given comparable, if not equitable, opportunity to engage digitally and develop their literacies (Hicks & Turner, 2013, 59).

To summarize, the internet and social media are being incorporated into everyday life at an ever increasing rate. Mastering online skills will be essential for our students’ future financial and political life. Schools have an important role to play in teaching these skills and a moral obligation to attempt to address inequity produced by the digital divide. The practice of avoiding the online world is education is now infeasible and undesirable.

**Managing Risks**

But if developing an online presence is a necessity, so too is teaching students about the risks of being online. These may include cyberbullying, grooming, luring and the seemingly innocuous leaving of a “digital footprint”.

The threat of online pedophiles first grooming then luring children is unfortunately real (CBC 2015) and it understandably causes a great deal of anxiety in parents, but it is also exceedingly rare. Furthermore, after conducting a meta-analysis of statistics on incidents of cyberbullying, Willard (2012) estimated that approximately 20% of students had experienced some form of it in the past. This is below reported statistics for face to face bullying (Hinduja & Patchin 2010) and as Willard (2012) states "the majority of digital aggression incidents are a continuation of--or in retaliation for--on campus altercations" (137). So despite grabbing all the headlines, luring and cyberbullying are not as pervasive a threat as our collective fears would have us believe. Nevertheless, educators and administrators have a legal obligation to minimize the risk to which students are exposed. They must act *in loco parentis* and do their best to meet the standard of care that this responsibility entails.

In the context of British Columbia this means adhering to the rigid guidelines set out in FIPPA- the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act. Teachers must make every effort to protect the identity of the students in their care. Educators must avoid placing data on servers which might be breached by foreign governments’ through such legal devices as the Patriot Act. They may not allow their students’ to publish work without first gaining the informed consent of the child’s parent or guardian which, in a multilingual ethnically diverse province such as BC, has the potential to be an arduous process. In addition, protocols must be proactively developed to deal with cyberbullying. How will it be documented should it occur? What will the consequences of cyberbullying look like? Incorporating technology into one’s teaching isn’t as straightforward as walking down to the computer lab and having the students’ log on.

**The Digital Footprint**

Social Media sites often market their services as “free”, but in fact when you sign up a trade is taking place. They are providing you with powerful publishing tool and in exchange you are providing them with personal information such as your age, gender, address, employment and even your relationship status- this information alone is a valuable commodity in the age of targeted marketing, but it represents just the first flakes of the blizzard of information that a person voluntarily gives up once he or she embraces Social Networking. This information, once published, is easily shared, copied and stored making the prospect of deleting it completely almost literally impossible. As Hengstler puts it, “there are no take backs in social networking” (Hengstler 2011).

The near permanence of online publishing can have devastating consequences for individuals’ future prospects. In August and September of 2015, three candidates withdrew from the Canadian Federal election. In each case, the cause of their fall from favour was social media posts that were attributed to them years earlier. While these three, put themselves deliberately in the public eye others have found themselves there unexpectedly. As more and more people are discovering, social media can quickly turn anyone into a “public” figure. Walter Palmer, a Minnesota dentist, became a worldwide pariah after hunting and killing Cecil the lion with a bow and arrow (CBC 2015).

Students must be made aware of the dangers that the media presents and learn to behave in a responsible and cautious manner, but learning requires trial and error and young adults are wired for reckless behaviour (Kolbert 2015). As digital natives grow and mature we will have the first generation whose lives will be open to scrutiny like never before. Perhaps this shared exposure to reciprocal judgements will produce a more tolerant and sympathetic society. Perhaps it will lead to increasing hypocrisy. Time will tell, but for now educators must do their best to bring students’ attention to the potential unintended consequences of participating in social media.

**Conclusion**

With the increase in time spent online and the availability of information through the internet, many educators have re-evaluated the importance of past curricular goals. Out of this introspection has sprung an awareness of the need for “online literacies”, a skill set defined by the Minister of Manitoba Education, Citizenship, and Youth as:

identifying appropriate inquiry questions; navigating multiple information networks to locate relevant information; applying critical thinking skills to evaluate information sources and content; synthesizing information and ideas from multiple sources and networks; representing information and ideas creatively in visual, aural, and textual formats; crediting and referencing sources of information and intellectual property; and communicating new understandings to others, both face to face and over distance. . . .(Minister of Manitoba Education, Citizenship, and Youth, 2006, p. 18).

However, before young people embark upon mastering any of these skills, they, as well as their parents or guardians, must be given the information they need to navigate the waters of the world wide web safely. Schools have a vital role to play in ensuring that this training happens safely.

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