

Navigating the BC Public Context for Social Media Use in Education

Not that long ago, the relationship between parents, children and the outside world was quite different than what we see today. Parents would allow their children to walk to school on their own; they would often send them out to play, and instruct them to be back when it got dark. Children could stay home caring for their younger siblings, and very rarely harm would come to them. The idea that something could happen to their children did not cross parents' minds, with the exception of people who lived near forests and were afraid of wolves or coyotes. And the system was safe; very few children were harmed or disappeared, and parents believed that their children were safe from harm.

In 1874, thanks to the abduction of Charley (Fass, 2010), a new possibility became clear to parents everywhere. Stories of child abduction became more publicized in the media; soon, people who had no worries at all became afraid for their children. Newspapers featuring stories related to child abduction sold like hot cakes, and the media – who knew that fear sold papers – discovered that no fear is greater than the fear of harm to a child. Gruesome details proved popular money-makers, and fed the fears of parents everywhere, who pressured the government for better regulations, unknowingly giving up some of their freedoms in the process. According to Thierer (2012), this phenomenon could fall under “Third-person effect hypothesis”; if something negative happens to one person in a certain situation, this instance becomes the launch board to a campaign of fear regarding said situation. This is, of course, propagated by a media frenzy surrounding the perceived danger.

Over the next hundred and fifty years, we have seen a “change in family patterns and expectations” (Fass, 2010); a trend towards overprotection originating from the highest levels, including government, is growing every year.

Now comes social media. While at first people did not see any danger associated with the use of social media, soon it became clear that it was another venue for the News associations to profit from, through the careful selection of stories displaying the worst outcomes that can happen through the use of the Internet. Currently, adults who are under the third-person effect spell are having a tough time “protecting the children” (since they can't stop the kids from using the internet). Caught in the middle of this process, teachers are struggling to make sense of Social media as an educational tool, while at the same time harbouring some fears of their own. Unsure of how to behave and display their personas online, many teachers have shunned social networking sites altogether, missing out on an important

method of connecting with their students. This lack of information diminishes the ability of teachers to advocate for their students, as well as to properly inform their students of how to use the internet in a safe and productive manner.

One of the biggest points we may be missing as educators is not only working on prevention tactics, but also explaining to students what they *can* do if something negative happens on the internet. We should be giving them tools with which to bounce back from, and rectify, bad situations. Keeping the conversation lines open and being positive is probably the best course of action when teaching about internet safety and how to build healthy boundaries.

It is important not to fear social media; as teachers, we are able to reach students easier and on their own terms, as well as inform students on how to build a healthy digital persona. There are so many tools that we can benefit from, and new ones are created every week. Being comfortable using these tools and building a culture in our classrooms that is technologically savvy and responsible is ultimately crucial for teachers in this new age of learning.

At the same time, it is important for us to keep a professional persona at all times, and serve as examples for our students on how to properly behave when using social media. While some people who have been using the internet for a long time know exactly how dangerous it can be, it seems like a few teachers may have gotten in the internet bandwagon a little later, and don't know the potential downfalls to conversing with the whole entire universe as if it was your very best friend. They don't understand how easily things can be found and linked back to them; many teachers have lost their jobs because of old photographs or comments made on a certain page, even when those were made a long time ago. This makes an even stronger case for proper education regarding professionalism when using social media from a young age. It is time for schools and districts to enforce a more direct approach to educating the teachers regarding proper usage of the internet as a means of communication. Hengstler (2011) mentions also that due to a teacher's position of trust, the lines between professional and personal life are indeed blurry, and this is something one must always remember when using social media.

But what is a positive, efficient way to explain to kids the impact of their behaviour online? The easiest way to turn off a child from listening is if it seems like they are speaking to a dinosaur who does not understand where they are coming from. Willard (2012) makes an excellent point when she implies that the usual ways to communicate the issues regarding online safety are often discredited by teens

because it feels like “fearmongering”. Online safety is something that currently only a few educators are equipped to do in an efficient and positive manner, and not relying on fear tactics. Explaining situations such as grooming and online sexual predators is important, but it is also important to keep the communication lines open with our students.

We must keep in mind that while students have grown up with social media, they do not know how to use it, or understand the damage misuse can cause to their professional careers in the future. Once you put something out there, it is there forever; the collection of things you post, share or tweet become your digital footprint. This is a valuable point for us to make to our students: the internet is the new “permanent record”. According to Hengstler (2011), “we (are) not sharing the long range perspective – as only mature adults can – to help younger people understand the potential impact of sharing information with the world” (p.91). But first, this must be done in a way that does not make the student feel as if we are trying to restrict or censor their behaviour; all change must come from their own realization of what is right or wrong, and that *if it is right or wrong in their real lives, it is also right and wrong online*. This simple message would help students understand and sympathize with victims of cyberbullying, for instance. Second, incorporating standards of professional behaviour, and making analogies that the student would understand, are great ways to start building your students’ professional persona. Finally, giving them imaginary scenarios to analyze and come to their own conclusions can be a powerful way to gain their attention.

The most interesting thing that people often fail to realize, when dealing with social media and the internet, is that the things they do in private are actually not that private. Everything, from a search you do to a website you visit, is recorded; trackers have existed for years. We are effectively creating a breadcrumb trail throughout our lives, that when assembled, provide a picture of who we are, our likes and dislikes, interests, persona online, and so on. People often believe that deleting their history is enough to protect their privacy, but in reality, that is the least of their worries. Social networks, for instance, often pose themselves as free, attracting people to use it, when in reality they are far from free; the currency they use is your personal information, mined and sold to the highest bidder. This breach of privacy has become a hidden price we are all too willing to pay in order to enjoy the benefits that these sites, and the internet in general, provide.

A way to help our students protect their private information, particularly as they grow their wings and comfort using technology and the internet, is to safeguard them from websites that collect information, whose servers are located outside Canadian soil; the reason for this is, under FIPPA, Canada

has much stronger protection of privacy regulations. According to Hengstler (2016), “if (...) students (...) share information that could identify them, and the data is stored in Canada and accessed only in Canada, you are not required to obtain consent.” (p.2) But if the information is going to be stored or accessed from outside of Canada, you should request a consent form from parents. If you consider how much of their rights and freedoms US citizens have lost since the 9/11 attacks, and how easily the government can compel companies to obtain all sorts of data from their servers, it makes sense to try and protect the students from an early age by using social media that is Canada-based.

As educators, we can also protect ourselves and our students by making sure we get consent from parents before embarking on any online journey together. Under “Consideration 4” of the Primer on Posting Student’s Work (p.6), Julia Hengstler mentions that “written informed consent” must be acquired. A place to find form templates is the Privacy Compass website (www.privacycompass.ca) created by Breanne Quist, which gathers good information and links regarding the protection of privacy. In order for it to be effective and informative, the consent must explain exactly what the social media is going to be used for, and all the safeguards that have been put in place to protect students’ privacy, as well as options for alternative assignments for parents who refuse to allow students to use social media, or for students who have no access to social media.

This brings us to something we often forget; not every one of our students has access to the internet. Our common assumption that everyone has accessibility is an issue that is perpetuated by the sense that the world is what we can see in our immediate surrounding area. In reality, 68% of the population in the planet has no access to the internet (A Human Right, 2016). In Canada, 12% of the population still lack internet connectivity (Internet Live Stats, 2016), and many areas with internet are still not considered reliable. These forgotten areas also happen to be the poorest areas within Canada, often in reserves and far away from big city centers. Because of the incredible power that being connected can bring to people – not only in terms of knowledge, but also improving their lives economically – the internet has also become a great economical divide, with some calling for it to be considered a human right. Repairing this divide, therefore, falls under the category of social justice.

As educators, it would be wonderful to allow all of our students to have the same opportunity to build their online persona and digital footprint; however, this is not always easy. To ensure our students are treated fairly, we must first become equalizers, providing to our students options to demonstrate learning that do not involve the use of the internet, or that offer opportunities for acquiring digital literacy through use of the computers in the classroom. While in the US, a program (even online) which

does not account for modifications for students with disabilities can be “found to be unlawfully discriminating” (Hengstler, 2016), Canada also provides protection to students under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Every student should have the opportunity to get the same grade and to learn the same things, regardless of their access to the internet; in the future, everyone will have access to the internet, but at this time, the best thing we can do as educators is to remember that many people don’t.

The second step is to remember that the social capital a student acquires through “repeated interactions with other individuals”(Hengstler, 2016) not only provides this student with social and cultural capital, but also with the beginning of a digital footprint, which if well cultivated, also increases the student’s ability to get a job. As teachers, we must help all students build this digital footprint in order to give them the same chances other people have; students with no internet connection at home are also at a disadvantage in the work force, and it becomes our responsibility to offer opportunities for these students to access the internet and become digitally literate.

Based on the idea that we define our own reality, the world becomes what we believe it to be; if we believe it is scary and dangerous, it becomes scary and dangerous. If we focus on the negative of anything, it is all we see. The benefits of social media are so huge, it becomes our duty as educators to understand it and use it in a sound and safe way, and serve as a knowledge source for our students. Even though it seems like there are many restrictions, in reality, the internet and social media open up a whole new world for our students. They can do all sorts of good things, such as learn new skills, create and distribute new content, make money by selling their digital products, make friends, join social networks and share their interests, and much, much more. But every one of these activities should be done with the understanding that this online persona is not an alter-ego; it is who they are, only on a digital format, and its actions reflect on them just as they would in the real world.

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