

Navigating the BC Public Context for Social Media Use in Education

The world is not what it used to be. Just twenty years ago, the Internet was still in its infancy and cell phones were mostly bulky things that people kept in their cars or used on fishing boats. Even Facebook has only been around for public consumption for 10 years (“Facebook”, 2016). How quickly things change. In the last ten years we have seen an explosion of technology and substantial migration from paper-based media to online digital sources. Key in this transition has been the birth of ‘smart’ devices. These smartphones and tablets have enabled content to be captured and broadcast almost instantly to nearly anyone around the world with an Internet connection. The change has been so quick that we are racing to catch up with it culturally, ethically, and professionally. The rise of social media has created a whole world of new possibilities for the sharing of information and learning. It has also caused a confusing labyrinth of considerations for teachers in terms of the boundaries of digital footprint and professionalism, privacy, social justice, and safety. To effectively navigate the BC public context for social media use in education, it is essential that students, parents, and educational leaders alike understand what social media are, the risks associated with them, and how to appropriately avoid them.

To understand social media, it is important to define what it is. Social Media is electronic media, which is created to be shared across the Internet, or between digital devices for the purpose of creating “communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content” (Social Media, 2016). Popular vehicles for social media include: Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, iMessage, etc. Media that are commonly shared are photographs, documents, audio, videos, or other user-generated content. Social media should not be confused with social networking which has a focus on creating communities and networks through the use of social media, although the two terms are growing closer and closer every day.

Digital Footprint and Professionalism

Given the amount of information that can be shared as mentioned, anyone who uses social media creates what is called a digital footprint instantly. This is basically akin to a paper trail of evidence for what you have done. The key difference here is that one’s digital footprint grows exponentially and cannot easily be erased by destroying the evidence in the way a paper-based trail can. As such, everyone should be conscious of their digital footprint and what they are putting out there for the world to see. In fact, you can never be too careful about your digital footprint. Even by using aliases or other means to hide your identity, eventually the content will be able to be traced back to you. Anything you share

publicly has no guarantee of privacy (Hengstler, 2012). Therefore the risk of a harmless post becoming something that haunts you is very possible. Job interviews are a great example of this. Whereas in the past, most interviews were based on your answers to questions and reference checks, now employers readily search the Internet and social media profiles to see what kind of person you are. That one suggestive picture from last week's party that you posted for fun might cost you the job. It is important that regular discussions about digital footprint take place in schools so that both teachers and students can protect themselves from unwanted attention and/or consequences. It is also essential that everyone understand that "The model of exponential publication and transmissions means that once tweeted—or otherwise published in a social network—there are no 'take-backs'" (Hengstler, 2011). A digital footprint is closely tied to digital professionalism.

For teachers, a clean digital footprint is very important to digital professionalism because they are "held to a higher standard of behaviour than the average person" (Hengstler, 2016). This also extends to their lives outside of school as evidenced in a 1987 ruling by the British Columbia Court of Appeal, which found that

Teachers must maintain the confidence and respect of their superiors, their peers, and in particular, the students, and those who send their children to our public schools. Teachers must not only be competent but they are expected to lead by example. Any loss of confidence or respect will impair the system, and have an adverse effect upon those who maintain a standard of behaviour which most other citizens need not observe because they do not have such public responsibilities to fulfill. (Shewan v. Board School Trustees of School District #34 (Abbotsford), p. 7)

It is increasingly more difficult to keep one's private life private. Teachers are regularly encouraged to clean up their profiles and be careful about what they post or send. Even private messages between teachers or friends can easily become public by being reposted by the recipient, whether by accident through a 'reply all', or as a form of revenge or willful aggression. Once this happens, it is incredibly hard, if not impossible, to undo the damage to a person's reputation. "Googling" oneself is one way of seeing what is immediately visible when someone looks you up. Also, when creating social media handles, choosing one that will not be easily misunderstood or similar to many others is a good idea. Of course, there is also the possibility that someone has the same name as you, in which case, if you have already Googled yourself and found something unsavory, you could possibly alert a potential employer about it

to ensure they do not mistake the content as yours. Privacy is becoming more and more difficult to protect in the digital world.

Privacy

One might think that it is possible to protect their privacy by using an alias and stripping the content of any identifiable personal information. This may be possible for a one-off post or picture, but what happens is that over time, information can be aggregated to link to a specific person as "...so many data points are available about individuals that any cluster of information--no matter if it is anonymized, no matter how irrelevant it may seem to 'Joe Public'--will be enough to track down an individual" (as cited in Hengstler, 2013, "Privacy Boundaries", OLTD 506). As a result of this, it is that much more important to think about what one posts online. It is good to keep in mind a few rules when posting such content: "Think twice, post once", "The Mother-Boss rule", and "When in doubt, leave it out" (Hengstler, 2012). Much of the risks of privacy can be avoided by having regular classes on the subject of digital citizenship and appropriate use of social media.

One area of Pro-D, which is especially important for teachers to take part in, is a discussion on the laws with regard to the Freedom of Information Protection of Privacy Act (FIPPA). Teachers must know what content they are allowed to capture, how they are allowed to store it, and if it is allowed to be posted to online access points. Teachers new to BC should check to see how the province's laws differ from where they came from. While most schools have a media waiver form for parents to sign at the beginning of the year regarding the capture and publication of student content and personal information, most of them are very broad and do not cover certain class projects or activities. In most cases, the waiver is limited to school publications and media releases. Teachers should review their school's policies regarding FIPPA and make sure that they always have a current list of permissions for any group they are working with. In the end, the law is the law and we should understand it as it pertains to online activities. "As educators we don't get to pick and choose the BC laws with which we will comply" (Hengstler, 2011). However, even with the best preparation and safeguards in place, some parents and students may not have enough knowledge of social media and the Internet to provide informed consent. These might be people who have no access to the Internet outside of school and are not digitally literate.

Social Justice

It is a reality of our schools today that most classes will have a few students that are from lower socio-economic families or that have no access to the Internet where they live. Many people call this the 'Digital Divide'. However, the term 'Digital Divide' isn't what it used to be or could mean one of two or more divides now. Instead of having access to the Internet or not, it is moving more toward technical proficiency or not due to the increasing penetration of the Internet into homes. Regardless, it is important to consider that some students and parents may fit into one or both definitions and therefore would need more detailed explanations or training to be able to provide informed consent. This is especially true when working with outlying rural schools or some First Nations band schools. There is an ongoing effort to extend Internet access to all areas of the province. However, "According to Taylor (2011) about 50% of First Nations communities across Canada in 2011 did not have access to residential broadband" (as cited by Hengstler, 2016, "Aboriginal Contexts", OLTD 506 (D2L)). Even with online or blended courses, we should not assume that everyone has access to them. As Hengstler states,

Why is it ipso facto? Aren't these types of programs self-selecting for students with technical inclinations? If so, what are the social justice aspects for those who do not have the opportunities to develop technical skills because of socio-economic constraints? (Hengstler, 2016, "Social Justice Boundaries", OLTD 506 (D2L)).

Social justice issues do not only apply to those who do not have Internet access or those who do not know how to use it. It is equally important to respect students and parents who have objections to the use of online content and digital platforms. Teachers must ensure that there is a suitable way for these students to complete the assignment offline if necessary. One common reason for parents to decline consent is a real or perceived safety threat.

Safety

While some families have legitimate safety reasons for declining to consent to the release or publication of anything that might identify them, such as estranged family members or court orders, many of the public's fear of social media and the Internet is due to a culture of exaggerated fears. "A veritable "technopanic" mentality is increasingly on display in debates over online child safety, privacy, cybersecurity, and even copyright policy" (Thierer, 2012). Unfortunately, fear sells and entices people to believe and act according to its wishes. If someone were to tell you that a high percentage of students that use social media were exposed to the risk of being groomed into child pornography and gave you

some high profile examples, you probably would think twice about letting your child use a smartphone while unsupervised. However, research shows that fear and misrepresentation of facts has driven societal and political agendas for years (boyd, 2012). The key to safe use of social media services and the Internet is good education based on accurate facts and responsible use. Nancy Willard (2012) provides many examples of this in her presentation “Examples of fear-based Internet safety messaging”. It is important to give students, parents, and administration a clear outline of the risks involved in any social media project. They should be shown how low (or high) the chances are for problems to occur. Each activity should begin with a reminder of safe Internet use and what to watch out for if they are using a service outside of class. Tolerance and respect should be reinforced to avoid any cyberbullying (as school bullying could easily make the jump to online media). boyd (2012) states in her presentation that the risks and dangers of problems like bullying have not increased significantly due to the Internet and social media. What is different is that it is viewed differently and the news of it spreads much more quickly. This is a key safety issue that should be stressed with students of the ‘smart’ generation. They should know that anything that they post could spread extremely quickly to countless numbers of people. Hence, we hear the term ‘going viral’ more and more often. boyd (2012) also suggests that trying to convince parents with statistics is doomed to failure because everyone “knows” someone who has had it happen to them or a friend of theirs. This is not to discount the reality of safety risks. Cyberbullying, predation and grooming, sexting, and revenge porn are just some of the things that do happen in the online world. They just happen less than frequently than we are led to believe. True safety happens when we understand the real risks involved and are prepared to avoid or deal with them effectively.

Conclusion

In order to effectively navigate the BC public context for social media use in education, it is essential that students, parents, and educational leaders alike understand what social media are, the risks associated with them, and how to appropriately avoid them. A common thread for each of the boundaries of digital footprints and professionalism, privacy, social justice, and safety is that education should be provided for all students, teachers, and administrators before using any social media in order to ensure that they understand clearly what potential risks are involved. In this way, everyone can take advantage of the opportunities that technology and the Internet offer in a safe and responsible way.

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