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Social Media in Secondary School Settings

In 2012, the American Management Association conducted a survey of 768 managers and executives of various companies on the importance of critical thinking, creativity, communication, and collaboration (the “4Cs”). The ability to successfully use the 4Cs was a desired skill employers look for but often find lacking in new graduates. The surveyed executives suggested that schools would have a better chance at effectively ingraining these skills in students than would companies after graduates are hired.

The importance of students leaving their K-12 education with the 4Cs is acknowledged by schools, but the difficulty comes with figuring out how to embed and teach these concepts in the modern classroom. A tried and true method has always been to tie learning to the interests of students, which is why secondary schools have begun to look at social media as one possible method to teach the 4Cs. Social media can be defined as ways for users to interact, communicate, and collaborate on various topics through the Internet. This entry first discusses the use of social media by teenagers and details the concerns about, and benefits of, the use of social media in secondary schools. It then discusses some examples of social media and how educators have used them.

There is no denying the impact of the Internet and social media on the modern teenager. A 2012 survey by the Pew Research Center found 95% of all teens between the ages of 12 and 17 were online. The same survey reported that 81% of all online teens use some form of social media, with 67% of teen social media users visiting a networking site daily. Considering that connecting students to real world experiences is a common practice in K-12, it should not be surprising to find schools expanding lessons and reaching out to their students through social media. Of course, with every opportunity, there are challenges that must be overcome.

Concerns About, and Benefits of, Social Media in the Secondary Setting

Many of the concerns schools have with students in a face-to-face setting will translate to online behavior, such as bullying and harassment. Interestingly, online harassment is not as prevalent as it is offline, but cyberbullying is far more common, with the possibility of severe consequences for the teens involved. Sexting, or the sharing of sexual images electronically, is concerning for schools as well. In 2009, 15% of teens who own cell phones said they received a sexual image of someone they know through text, while 4% said they have sent an image of their own. Some states in the United States have passed laws to curb sexting among minors.

A final concern revolves around privacy and the sharing of personal information online. The information placed on the Internet never truly disappears. There is a concern that students often lack the foresight to see how one inappropriate photo posted might impact their future. However, the 2012 PEW survey showed that 60% of teenage Facebook users kept private accounts. The naïve assumption is that a private account is a secure account. A privacy setting for a social media site is simply not enough of a barrier to keep personal information from becoming public.

While cyberbullying and inappropriate postings are serious concerns, there are also benefits of social media to students. Social media offer communication and collaboration workspaces that can be customized to fit many learning situations. Certain social media sites allow for personalization along with plug-ins that can enhance the experience through wikis, forums, and more. With or without these plug-ins, social media sites can effortlessly promote communication and collaboration amongst users. Students have the ability to share projects and information with classmates, work both asynchronously and synchronously in groups, and have the opportunity to engage in meaningful discourse, all while working virtually.

Further, the socialization aspects of social media should not be ignored. Social media allow students to interact with their peers in a setting that might be preferable to face-to-face settings. Sharing ideas and participating in online discussions could help these students become more comfortable with social interactions. If proper rules are set up, social media can give students chances to practice being respectful, tolerant of others, and have proper online etiquette. These benefits give students the opportunity to amplify classroom learning through the use of modern technologies.

Examples of Popular Social Media

There are a wide variety of social media applications that can be accessed from the classroom. The following non-exhaustive list offers examples of popular technologies.

Social Networks

Social networks allow users to share information while maintaining relationships and can be used both asynchronously and synchronously. The most recognizable of these sites is Facebook, with over 1 billion monthly users. LinkedIn is another well-known social network, focused primarily on professional connections. Leveraging this popularity, some secondary schools have created pages dedicated to specific classes, services (such as student counseling), and various student groups.

Microblogging

Microblogging is the ability to publish communication asynchronously and synchronously, usually using no more than 140 characters. Twitter and Plurk, popular microblogging sites, can be used for multiple purposes. Teachers have used microblogging to communicate quick reminders to students and to get students to participate and engage in discussions.

Blogs

Usually described as a virtual journal, a blog is an asynchronous method of publishing writings that can remain private or be made public. For the classroom, using an educational site such as EduBlogs allows students opportunities to reflect and share, letting their peers comment and begin whole class discussions. In some cases, educators have used blogs to model language learning and proper paragraphs for nonnative speakers.

Wikis

To understand and grasp the impact of wikis, there is no need to look any further than Wikipedia. With over 76,000 active contributors, this popular site allows people to read, edit, and add to a collective knowledge database of over 31 million articles as of 2014. Student wikis, created through sites such as Wikispaces, can be used in much the same way in an asynchronous manner. Collaboration and the sharing of ideas can be a basic focus for classroom wikis.

Video

YouTube is the leading site in the video-sharing category. Boasting more than 1 billion unique user visits each month, this asynchronous site allows users to upload videos and leave comments in a discussion thread. Other video services include TeacherTube (more directed to educators) and Vimeo. For the classroom, video can be used simply as a visual resource. However, students can also post their own class-related videos and have their peers leave comments.

Social Bookmarking

Using popular tools such as Delicious or Diigo, social bookmarking allows users to collect and share websites with other users asynchronously. For the classroom, teachers can set up bookmarks for students who then have the ability to visit and annotate with notes that can be

pushed out to the class. Social bookmarks can help collaboration among students as they share information.

Conclusion

The rise of social media gives schools another opportunity to use a real world connection with their students. The benefits are plentiful, allowing for collaboration and communication opportunities both in and out of the classroom. Depending on the social media tool selected, students can share videos, writing, and photos while allowing others to comment and interact. While the socialization aspects are powerful, educators should strongly consider the online safety of young teens before venturing into social media. If not supervised properly, social media can open students up to cyberbullying and leaving a negative digital footprint, both of which could have strong, lasting effects.

Social media has become ingrained into the teenage lifestyle. As with other cultural touchstones, schools should not be afraid to make an educational connection. If the concerns are addressed properly, the benefits could be significant for both the students and the schools.

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