

Going social

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When Ferris Bueller in the iconic eighties movie *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* said, "Life moves pretty fast. If you don't stop and look around once in a while, you could miss it." He could not have foreseen exactly how quickly technology was going to advance. With no public internet and therefore no tweeting, texting, emailing or Snapchatting, the daring and fast-paced world of Ferris Bueller seems wholesome and insular compared with the 24-hour connectedness of today's society. Even the now-ubiquitous Google didn't begin to dominate as a search engine until the hypothetical Bueller would have been in his thirties!

But it is the rise of social media in its many forms that has perhaps caught the world, and particularly the education sector, off guard more than any other aspect of the digital age. While the concept of a generation gap has been around since the dawn of time, today's digital native students, who have the time and the knowledge to seamlessly adapt to new trends and developments, are often so far ahead of the rest of the population on the information superhighway that you might be forgiven for thinking they are going to disappear around a bend, never to be seen again.

So it's a good time to stop and look around to consider what social media is all about, why it so engages our students, and how to use it safely and effectively to capitalise on its potential.

According to *Oxford Dictionaries*, the definition of social media encompasses, 'Websites and applications that enable users to create and share content or to participate in social networking' (Oxforddictionaries.

com, 2015). It is a broad term that covers everything from blogging to forums to collaborative online document creation and curation through programs such as Google Apps, but perhaps the area with both the greatest potential for learning and engagement, and for engendering suspicion and outright terror in schools is social networking.

The spectacular rise in popularity of services such as Twitter and Instagram has led to a reimagining of communication that appears to be here to stay. Politicians have been quick to jump on the social networking bandwagon, with sometimes humorous results – think Kevin Rudd tweeting about cutting himself shaving or NSW Premier Barry O'Farrell accidentally sharing a private tweet publicly. In fact, Twitter has even released *The Twitter Government and Elections handbook*, a guide to 'Discover new and innovative strategies to grow your Twitter presence and engagement rate,' and 'Maximise the impact of your account by integrating Twitter into your events and leveraging the full suite of Twitter tools' (Twitter.twimg.com, 2015).

What's particularly telling about this is that as far as I can see, there is no equivalent guide for educators to assist them with navigating the Twitter landscape both personally and professionally. And yet Twitter and its hipper counterparts such as Instagram and Snapchat are not solely the domain of the young; once you start looking, there is a plethora of information about how innovative educators are using social media to promote learning and connectedness.

In an examination of possible applications of social media in higher

education, Marlyn Tadros (2011) observes that "... engaging students in the learning process means getting students to relate what they have learned to their real lives, encourages critical thinking and nurtures self-motivation. Social media has the potential to achieve this goal and to substantially alter the learning process."

The benefits of 'real world learning' have long been touted, and there are many who have already begun exploring and successfully implementing programs and activities that bring the online world that students inhabit after hours into the classroom. Below are some specific examples of how teachers, school systems and organisations are embracing the possibilities of some of the more popular social media services and programs, as well as an examination of some of the issues that are worth considering before taking a trip down that path.

Twitter

You are probably familiar with micro-blogging service Twitter through, if nothing else, distracting viewer tweets that scroll along the bottom of many live TV shows. While the 140-character limit is in some ways constraining, it also forces users to succinctly capture their ideas. For example, if students are set the task of writing a book or movie review for Twitter, they have to make conscious choices about the most important aspects of the book or film and their response to it. If they then actually post their reviews, they have the opportunity to participate in worldwide interactions on the topic.

In the same vein, you could allocate a particular character from a book being studied to students or groups of students and have them create a Twitter account in that name – for example @LadyMacBeth. Students can then conduct an online conversation about central themes from the book from the point of view of their particular character. This avoids the awkwardness of roleplaying while encouraging students to think more deeply about the work they are studying.

Twitter offers many opportunities for local and international connectivity that were not available even five or 10 years ago. On the *Edutopia* blog, education consultant Monica Burns (2015) describes how Twitter can be used to give students access to experts such as authors or publishers. "Children's authors can be found on

Twitter, providing students with a chance to share their love of a favorite book, pose a question, or give an opinion in 140 characters or less. They won't be guaranteed a response, but students can practice a range of skills as they write concise tweets around a particular topic," she writes.

Similarly, hashtagged comments or questions about a particular subject area can attract the attention of scientists, academics or others with specific knowledge who can broaden students' perspectives or understanding about what is being studied.

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Instagram

Unlike Twitter's conversation focus, Instagram is a picture and video-sharing platform for use with smartphones. You can access Instagram via a computer, but uploading and sharing can only be done on a mobile device. Before you let this put you off though, consider that there are five million active Instagram users in Australia, making it the fourth most popular social media platform after Facebook, YouTube and WordPress (Cowling, 2016).

Many teachers have started to capitalise on students' interest in Instagram by integrating its use into classroom activities. Among her recommendations, Hannah Hudson from the We Are Teachers website suggests simple activities such as featuring a student of the week on a class or school Instagram account, to more complex undertakings such as tasking students with creating a bulletin board that would represent what the Instagram feed of a famous historical figure might look like (Hudson, 2015).

The visual nature of Instagram means that it also lends itself well to photo-essays. Students can create and share photo-essays about anything from a scientific concept being studied to what they experienced on an excursion. Photos can be captioned and enhanced using Instagram tools, building students' knowledge and experience of multimedia composition and

Resources to get you started on Instagram

10 Surprising Ways to Use Instagram in the Classroom

<http://www.weareteachers.com/blogs/post/2014/08/07/10-ways-to-use-instagram-in-the-classroom>

Everything YOU need to know about Teaching with Instagram

<http://www.avatargeneration.com/2015/01/everything-you-need-to-know-about-teaching-with-instagram/>



communication. As with other forms of social media, the ability to share student work for dialogue and feedback then makes it a powerful tool for student learning. An added benefit is that work can easily be shared with parents too, building home-school partnerships.

Pinterest

Pinterest is basically an online virtual scrapbooking platform where you can store, organise and share information relating to particular topics. While you can consider supporting students to establish and share their own Pinterest boards, more than any of the social media types covered in this article, Pinterest can be used as a source of information and inspiration for teachers and students alike.

From a teacher perspective, there is a Pinterest board for just about any topic you can think of. Want some activities to teach phonics? There are a plethora of boards dedicated to the subject. Struggling with behaviour management in your classroom? Pinterest boards with a host of ideas and resources abound. The repository of knowledge that is Pinterest can be particularly useful for teachers starting out, but any educator looking for a bit of creative stimulation is likely to find something that meets their needs.

Similarly students can be directed to particular Pinterest boards or to seek out Pinterest boards on specific concepts, topics or issues. A quick random search revealed boards on all three topics I entered – Year 11 Chemistry, essay writing tips and tropical rainforest heritage – so there is not much that you can't find there. You can then use Pinterest boards as a basis for guiding students to compare and evaluate different reference sources, and even to analyse the curation of information on a particular board.

Of course, both teachers and students can

Resources to get you started on Twitter

50 Ways to Use Twitter in the Classroom

<http://www.teachhub.com/50-ways-use-twitter-classroom>

The Ultimate Guide To Using Twitter In Education

<http://www.edudemic.com/twitter-in-education/>

28 Simple Ways To Use Twitter In The Classroom

<http://www.teachthought.com/uncategorized/28-simple-ways-to-use-twitter-in-the-classroom/>



Resources to get you started on Pinterest

Pinterest for education: from beginner to advanced user
<http://www.opencolleges.edu.au/informed/teacher-resources/pinterest-education/>

How Teachers and Educators Can Use Pinterest as a Resource In and Out of the Classroom

<http://www.stevespanglerscience.com/blog/2012/09/17/how-teachers-and-educators-can-use-pinterest-as-a-resource-in-and-out-of-the-classroom/>



also set up their own Pinterest boards. A Pinterest board allows educators to 'pin' useful websites and resources they come across in one place. It's a simple and quite visual way of storing all those links that you often forget about or that mysteriously disappear from your bookmarks or browsing history, never to be retrieved. In the same way, students can store and share useful resources that relate to what they are studying.

The owner of a board can also allow multiple pins, which means a group or class of students can all contribute to a board established by the teacher. For example, if you were studying cities of the world, each student could pin a picture or information about their favourite city to make a class bulletin board on the topic.

Cross-media potential

Many organisations operate across multiple social media platforms, inviting people to contribute to discussions via their choice of services including Twitter, Instagram and Tumblr. The use of hashtags and Twitter handles enables all the conversations to be viewed in one place, regardless of which service they were initially posted on. The way users manage this varies depending on the service, so for example in Flickr, users can connect their Twitter and Flickr accounts through their settings to make sharing posts between platforms easy – rest assured your students will know how to do this!

QKED, a Northern California based public media service provider, for instance, presents provocations for ethical dilemmas and world issues that students are challenged to respond to in some way via

social media through its Do Now program.

As a recent example, the post 'Would you buy a Genetically Modified Pet?' gave an explanation of the science and the potential concerns with the issue, complete with links to further articles and other resources, as well as a link to a video on KQED Quest, which explains how and why genetic modification of pets occurs (Do Now Science, 2015). The call to action at the end of the video is for students to browse the resources, conduct their own research and share their thoughts via their choice of social media. If their social media accounts are linked across platforms, their contributions can then be accessed by others on any of those services.

Social media precautions

It is often concerns about the safety aspects of social media that dissuade teachers or schools from actively using it in the classroom. We wouldn't let students go out into the playground without rules and active guidance, and the same applies to allowing students to roam on a virtual playing field. With appropriate safeguards in place, and clear rules for the students, the likelihood of trouble can, however, be minimised.

Few schools would not already have some form of Acceptable Use policy in place relating to technology and a good starting point is ensuring that introducing social media in the classroom aligns with this. There are, however, some quite specific considerations relating to social media. Many of the education departments around Australia have publically available resources that schools can draw on when contemplating social media use to address these issues.

One example is the Western Australian Department of Education *Social Media in Schools: Guidelines for staff using social media and other technologies* document (2010) which outlines the potential dangers of using social media:

Online education for students carries various risks including:

- Access to inappropriate or restricted materials
- Cyber predators and cyber bullying
- Inappropriate behaviour by a student arising from the imagined anonymity when seated in front of a computer
- Commercial exploitation of students while on the internet through advertising
- Breach of copyright law through the unlicensed downloading and use of material from the internet.

Its advice for keeping students safe includes explicitly discussing the potential for encountering inappropriate material and how to avoid this as much as possible; running cyber-education sessions that include issues of privacy and password protection; and ensuring there are clear policies in place about mobile device and web application use.

The Victorian Education Department also has an excellent website that covers many aspects of social media use, including guides to support teachers to respond to inappropriate online behaviours and to removing unwanted or inappropriate content from websites. They also offer two free online learning modules for teachers – one on safe social media use that incorporates interactive scenarios with their possible outcomes and consequences, and one on bullying and cyberbullying.

Getting parents on board early is also critical. Parents and carers are typically experiencing the same sense of loss of control over technology and how students are using it as teachers might, and therefore may express concern about the adoption of social media in the classroom. Betty Ray, Director of Programming and Innovation at *Edutopia* notes on their blog that one teacher with whom she had interactions spent months preparing to implement social media practices, only to have the whole project quashed by a parent before it got going (Ray, 2012).

Ray also tells of a school in Utah that was having problems with students using Twitter as a bullying platform outside school hours. "They



concluded that it's necessary to get ahead of these behaviours by working with parents and the greater community to bring more of an adult presence to social media. Rather than try to shut it down – which, by the way, drives it underground and creates a great environment for bullies – Draper [the school principal] argued that the school should take a leadership role in modelling strong social media engagement.” So in the same way that we are obliged to include sex education in the curriculum so that students’ only sources of knowledge are not their peers and the internet, we need to be actively educating students and modelling effective and responsible use of social media.

In addition to the obligatory information evenings, one way to support parents to see the potential of social media for students is to actively engage them in it. Before starting to use Twitter with students, for instance, teachers can begin a class Twitter feed for parents to see and respond to students’ learning journeys, access resources and homework tasks, and interact with the teacher and other parents to ask questions and keep up-to-date with what’s happening in the class. Once parents are comfortable with how this works, then classroom practices involving Twitter can be introduced.

The future

While social media apps and services will continue to change and evolve at a rapid rate, as a concept, social media is likely to be with us for years to come. Williamson and Johnston (2013) argue that, “Social media technologies allow educators to think of solutions to problems of access and equity that have plagued schools for generations and to think of new approaches to teaching and learning that were never before possible.” If you are at all familiar with the film *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off*, you’ll remember how disengaged students were anytime scenes from the classroom were shown – so disengaged that they would go to great lengths to skip school and experience life. So rather than putting social media into the too hard basket, why not use the opportunity to bring some of that life into the classroom?

Further reading

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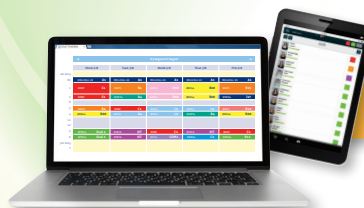
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