Reflection on Course Learning

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My journey through this course has been one full of mixed emotion, in particular in relation to what has been going on personally in my life this past six weeks. It is through this process that I have come to value more than ever before the use of social media, in particular Facebook. It has allowed me to stay connected with friends and family near and far through private messaging and posting on my main page. Through this connection I have received the support I have needed to help me through the passing of my mother. At this same time I have come to realize, why others question the use of Facebook and why some choose not to use it at all. While this applies to Facebook it can be applied to any social media tool and social network, and not only does it apply to personal use but also to my role as a teacher.

As I used Facebook often, during these past six weeks, I always had in the back of my mind that what I posted would become part of my digital footprint. I made sure therefore that whatever I posted was professionally written. I was also more conscious of what others had posted and made sure that those I responded to had posted appropriate comments and/or photos. There were even a couple of times that I chose not to comment or like a person’s status due to what was posted, thinking how it might present me in an unprofessional manner.

During this time my sister unfortunately was sent a comment on one of her Facebook posts that I consider cyber bullying, from someone she thought was a friend. The interesting thing is that it was a public post so others saw it and they were appalled as well. My sister and others chose to ignore the comment and posted positive comments in relation to the original post. I had heard and read about this occurring in society but I was so surprised to see this behaviour from an adult. The person who made the comment is obviously either not aware of her digital footprint and the importance of digital citizenship or she does not care. Both are not a good position to be in.

I knew before starting this course that some people are uncomfortable with the use of Facebook. This was made evident to me further in this course. I believe there are a few reasons for this. First off Facebook is hosted on the US domain so it is not subject to Canadian Law, FIPPA, which is much more stringent than that of the US in relation to the sharing of our personal information. This is evident to me when on Facebook as the ads that pop up are ones that are related to sites I have previously visited. Secondly, once you become a friend of someone you can then easily see who their friends are and if the friends do not have the correct privacy settings you can see all of their posts and who their friends are and so on and so on; also if you post a comment on the person’s wall rather than private messaging someone, others can see exactly what you have posted whether they are your friends or not. Using an Ipad with Facebook does not even allow you to private message. The latter two point to the importance, when using social media, of reading through the privacy policy and terms of use, and making sure you understand how the privacy settings work. The third reason is that information that some think is private, comments and photos, may be posted by others. Not everyone wants to have a picture they are in shared with people they do not know and they may not wish information shared that they feel is private. Again a key point here is that it is always important to get permission from others before sharing a photo or a comment that they made. Many people do not think of the significance of this, but it is important.

This leads in to the importance for us as teachers when looking to use Web 2.0 with our students. Permission is of utmost importance before we introduce our students to the use of a web based tool/social media, but long before we get to the point of creating the permission/consent form there are many steps we need to go through.

First one needs to develop a rationale for why one needs to use social media. One should not just be using the tool only as an alternate means of students sharing their knowledge but rather the task should also be based on gaining from the tools use. For example, for distance learning students who often do not have the opportunity for face to face communication, the use of social media can allow them to participate in that important student to student and student to teacher communication.

Once we have the why of its use this then leads to choosing a social media tool, fenced or open, that meets both the teacher’s needs and the students. I have found the following, developed by Hengstler (2013) and introduced to me in this course, helpful in making this choice: “Hengstler Social Media Scaffolding Model, Hengstler Abilities Framework and Hengstler Model for Participation, Area and Connections”. Each is based on students’ grade levels and involves scaffolding from kindergarten to grade 12. The “Hengstler Social Media Scaffolding Model” is a three stage process. Students in the first stage are observing and learning by watching knowledgeable adults and participation is through adults, the second stage is a contained and corrected environment that goes from limited to increasing participation in contained systems where participants are controlled and known, and the final stage is open access, at this point skills are embedded to adequately gauge and manage risk and students have full participation. The latter two “Hengstler Abilities Framework and Hengstler Model for Participation, Area and Connections” demonstrate how student’s social media and networking abilities would be scaffolded and reflected over the grade groupings of K-3/4, 5-8, 9-10 and 11-12.

Once the tool is chosen the next step one needs to look at is students having permission to use the tool. Although most districts have a permission form, that all students and their parents complete at the beginning of the school year, they are often not specific enough and do not relate to the specific tools use. One then needs to develop a permission form that relates specifically to that tool. In looking at the specific tool one must look at the privacy factors and risk of use, and be able to clearly state these in the permission/consent form. As well one must have a plan in place of how to deal with any issues as they arise whether it be students not following through with the agreed upon specific expectations, terms and conditions and/or if somehow accounts are hacked from outside sources. This is why it is important to limit the amount of personal information that is ever shared when using social media tools in particular in a school setting. The legal ramifications are such that unless stated specifically a teacher could find themselves involved in a law suit. This realisation has made the use of social media in the classroom scarier for me.

One often hears about the risks involved with the use of Web 2.0 and this has actually led to a full blown fear in some known as “technopanic” (Theirer, 2013). It has been found that the level of risk is actually being blown out of proportion and that the benefits out way the risks (Willard, 2012). Further as stated by, Thierer (2013), “While it’s true that cyberspace has its fair share of troublemakers, there is no evidence that the Internet is leading to greater problems for society.” This is reassuring in and of itself.

There are some parents however who still choose not to sign the permission/ consent form as they do not want their child(ren) using the internet. We cannot as teachers expect that all students will be able to participate so we must have, as part of our plan, an alternate way for students to participate in the same activity. This is not only for students whose parents do not give consent but there are students who may not have access to a computer and/or the internet at home or in their community. This again needs to be taken in to account, for as teachers we do not want to be the ones who increase the digital divide “…an [economic inequality](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Economic_inequality) between groups, broadly construed, in terms of access to, use of, or knowledge of [information and communication technologies](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Information_and_communications_technology).” (Wikipedia, 2013). We want to give all students equal opportunity.

In relation to implementing a social media plan, as a teacher, and working toward meeting my goal of equal opportunity for all my students, I am continuing to consider a timeline for both. With all that has gone this past six weeks I am working on bringing a balance to my life. My social media resource package, which I developed in this course, involves my Math 8 students and P.E. 5-8 students using the closed social media tool Twiducate, a free private social network that allows students to communicate and share, privately or on a home page with each other, the teacher or students in another class (Twiducate, 2009-2012). My goal is to roll this out within the next few months. During this time I hope to look at developing a plan for social media use with my older students’ grades 9-12, referencing what I have learned in this course and looking to what is offered through such social media sites as Twitter and Pintrest, both I find great for professional development.

In closing there are many factors one must take in to account as one looks to using social media and social networking both for personal use and as a teacher. I believe that the benefits definitely out way the risks. For personal use the key is paying close attention to my digital footprint, acting as a professional at all times is best. In my role as a teacher, I must make sure I am well informed and up to date in my understanding of best practices in relation to the use of social media tools and social network. I must in turn make sure my students and parents are also well informed about the use of social media when a new tool is introduced, in particular given an up to date permission form and related documentation for each new tool. Further I need to feel confident in my use of social media and social networking and offer, to the best of my ability, a safe web based learning environment for students or an alternate activity as needed. In this way I am helping guide students in their development of the skills needed to become confident users of 21st century resources/tools, with the knowledge that I am offering each an equal opportunity for success in this ever changing world.

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