Introducing Social Media into Elementary School Classrooms

by Jay Donaldson

Social media has certainly become a part of all our lives, particularly the lives of today's children. It is the communication tool that they have been brought up with, but it is generally illegal to let a child have a social media page under the age of 13—Facebook states that its legal age limit for use is 13 years old and while Twitter does not state an age limit it does state that it is not intended for users under 13 years old. Unnecessarily restrictive? Not really.

Despite the clearly stated and published age restrictions, according to Knowthenet's "Social Age Study," approximately 59% of children use a social network by the time they are ten years old. Sadly, the study indicates that over 70% of parents are negligent in taking responsibility in educating their children in the correct, safe and ethical use of social media or in sharing with them the devastating effects it can have on children and families. Many children now have cell phones, tablets or other personal devices at nine or ten years of age, but are rarely educated by their parents on the safe and correct use of these communication devices when they access the Internet.

Added to this, an estimated 93% of companies now use social media for business purposes (Erik Qualman, *Socialnomics*), and it will inevitably be a part of students' work places in the future—digital networking, collaborative teamwork, marketing and communication via social media—and so today's students require opportunities to develop the competencies needed for their future careers.

In my opinion, teaching children skills such as social etiquette, truthful discernment and responsible communication should now be included in the curriculum, and of course, educating them of the dangers inherent in the use of social media. So here is my advice to all elementary schools.

- Invest in a social media platform designed for the classroom. There are several on the market. Such platforms offer varying breadths of opportunity for learning while also providing teachers with a tool to teach the children how to correctly and safely use social media.

- Start slowly. I introduced our social media platform with a discussion about what attracts people to "like" us on Facebook or "follow" us on Twitter. It is all about effective communication, being interesting, amusing and attaching relevant images. We discussed the ethics of tagging someone in a picture. The children appreciated that writing effectively and creatively can therefore influence how many "likes" they attract; an important thing for young people.

- Global learning. We invested in a platform that supported communication with children in other countries, something I would definitely recommend. Giving the children the opportunity to communicate with children overseas, share experiences, and to learn about a topic that we

may be covering in class at that time is invaluable. Speak to the classroom teacher from the other school in advance to find out what the students there are currently studying, and agree on a topic that benefits both classes.

- Consider setting up a social media page for someone from history. For example, set up a personal account for Sir John A. Macdonald. Give everyone in the class a part to play and encourage communication as if the children were Macdonald himself and members of his entourage.

- Turning to literacy, the blog feature of your social media platform can be used to keep a daily journal and eventually students will add images to their text too. Blogging enables them to demonstrate their writing skills in a topic that really appeals to them. After a discussion about constructive critiques, a whole class session could include reading some of the blog posts and providing the author with constructive feedback.

- Good classroom social media platforms should have a teacher's dashboard where all activity can be monitored. Cyber bullying and pedophilia are the sad realities of mainstream social media and they emphasize the importance of teaching our children how to use social media and the Internet correctly and safely. Ensure that you scan each day's activity for any inappropriate communication. If you do see anything of concern, use this as an opportunity for learning. On one occasion we had an incident in which one student sent a pigeon post email to another person in the class writing hurtful personal comments. I took the student who authored the post aside and we had a discussion about why it is wrong to send hurtful emails. He was embarrassed and apologetic. While no names were mentioned, we then had a class discussion about the incident and had the opportunity to discuss the hurt and damage that this type of action can cause.

- And finally the aspect of social media that I value most is the fact that all students can interact with the features regardless of their academic ability. In every class there will always be the exceptional learner, the slow learner and the students in the middle. The functionality is basic, intuitive and systematic, and regardless of each child's level of education, my students are all able send chat messages and pigeon post emails without assistance from the teacher.

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