

Chapter 3:

Harnessing the Power of Social Networking

Introduction

In the first chapter, you were introduced to the concept of social networking in the context of building a personal learning network of other educators from which you will learn and grow professionally. Educators all over the world connect with each other to grow and it benefits all of us. For whatever reason, though, students are often left out of the equation when it comes to social networking.

There are many advantages to introducing your students to social networking. First, leveraging social networking gives students immense power to direct their own learning. Similar to how we choose what we want to learn by focusing our conversations online with those who have similar interests, students can find both like-minded students as well as experts. Second, students become less dependent on you as a teacher. This almost seems too good to be true. When students are motivated and interested, and when they have a real stake in what they are learning, they want to learn more. They continue to learn even outside of school. Once your students are able to effectively network online, you are able to step back some. They still need a guide, but they do not need every second planned for them or every answer given to them. Third, students' self-esteem grows proportional to their self-sufficiency. When students are completely dependent on you, a lot of their self-esteem is built on what you think of them. This is a large and dangerous responsibility. As students become more self-sufficient and independent, they learn to become experts, to help others, and to learn how to learn when they do not

understand something. Their self-esteem can be more intrinsic, which is healthier for the students.

So, What's the Catch?

There is no catch. Social networking is a real boon to both students and teachers. However, there are some real risks. These risks can be minimized through proper instruction and implementation, but before any students start using social networks in your class it is wise to be aware of them. By recognizing the risks, you can take steps to minimize them so that students can focus on learning.

First, many social networks are blocked at school. My district blocks Twitter, Facebook, MySpace, YouTube, and only recently unblocked Ning after intense pushback from teachers. Teachers are often erroneously left out of the decision-making process when it comes to which sites to block and which to allow. Recently, I have spoken to administrators and technology directors about why they choose to block social networks; I have also asked teachers what the most common responses are when they want to use social networks with their students. Some of the answers I received are below:

- Social networks are of no educational value.
- Teachers and/or students do not have to learn social networking skills.
- Social networks promote bad writing skills.
- Social networking sites are filled with viruses and can hurt your computer.
- Students will be too distracted.
- Students will find inappropriate and/or dangerous things online.

Unfortunately, I have fought these same battles repeatedly in several schools. It seems the same excuses are prevalent regardless of country or socioeconomic status.

Since these fears are so widespread, I would like to take a minute to look into their validity and whether or not they schools are really fulfilling their obligation to protect students by blocking social networks.

The first issue is that social networks have no educational value. This was addressed in both the introduction to this chapter and the first chapter of the book. The educational value of any social network is determined by how a person chooses to utilize it. A student could get on Facebook to ask a question about a sporting event or about how to do the homework. To dismiss all social networks as being devoid of educational content is simply short-sighted.

The second issue is the idea that teachers and students do not have time to learn social networks. This is a fallacious excuse. While more is crammed into curricula than ever before, everyone makes times for those things that they find important and meaningful. Furthermore, students already have the skills. They just need to be taught how to safely use the skills they already have. Therefore, in most cases where people claim to not have time, they really need to be convinced that it is worth their time. Even in a packed curriculum, spending time up front to train students and/or teachers will pay dividends when students are able to become more invested in the learning process.

The third issue is that social networking sites promote poor writing skills. There may be some truth to this. The reality is that the trend started before social networks and would continue without them. Text messages were popular before social networks and limit messages to 160 characters. This limitation necessitated clever abbreviations to many. Twitter, Facebook, and other sites acclimate students to the idea of writing short posts. Whether or not social networks are allowed in schools, students will still use cell-

phones and social networks outside of schools. Allowing the use of social networks in school can actually help remedy this issue depending on how it is implemented. When I have utilized social networking with my students, I explain that proper grammar, punctuation, etc... is expected in all school writing. Most comply easily; some will lapse over time, but you as the teacher just constantly reinforce the expectation and maintain high standards for you students. It is also wise to teach the students about context. It is not wrong to talk to friends using the local colloquia. Having said that, students need to be able to differentiate between contexts and choose which form of language is best in which context. This is a skill that will benefit them in many situations.

Among IT people, it is a common belief that social networks are riddled with viruses and malware that can harm your computer. Twitter and Facebook are often cited as examples. There is a grain of truth to this rumor as there are too many. This presents us with another teachable moment about Internet safety and as we constantly reinforce online safety it should not escalate into a problem. Almost all viruses and malware that are downloaded on social networks come from clicking on links. These links originate with someone. For example, someone online may write a post such as, "If you like watching baseball, click here! <http://bit.ly/12323>" There are a couple of things worth noting in this common example. First, the post catches the attention of a student interested in baseball. It could easily be about any subject a student might be interested in though. Second, the link was shortened. There are any number of services that shorten URLs (A URL is a web address, such as <http://jasontbedell.com>). The main reason these services exist is to make long URLs short enough to fit inside a message post. So, if you

go to the URL in the example, it should take you to Google. However, it could take you anywhere.

The lesson here is threefold. First, never click on links from strangers. This is especially true if it is not about what you are working on for class. Second, never click on a shortened URL (This could look like <http://bit.ly>, <http://tinyurl.com>, <http://ow.ly>, <http://goo.gl>, and many others.) unless you are absolutely sure of the source. Many of the social networks that will be discussed here are closed social networks, This means that the only people who are going to be a part of the social network are members of your classes. This should all but eliminate the problem. If you choose to use a public social network like Facebook or Twitter, it just requires training your students on when they should click on a link. Third, never agree if the computer asks you to download something. Most schools have their computers setup so that students cannot download or install anything, which protects the computer. If not, we must continue to stress the importance of not agreeing to do anything we are not sure of. This may seem redundant, but continual repetition and reinforcement will help keep the students safe and the computers working.

The fifth issue is that students will be too distracted. In colleges and universities, where it is common for students to have laptops, many professors are squandering resources by not allowing students to use the tools they have to their greatest potential. Recently, a professor staged a demonstration in his class where he took a student's (non-functioning) laptop, dipped it in nitrous oxide, and then smashed it. While the tool is different, the idea is the same. He did not want his students distracted.

The problem with this line of thinking is that it includes the assumption that without laptops or social networking, the students would all be sitting in rapt attention. I love seeing classrooms where every student is engaged, but that engagement does not come from taking away things that can make class more interesting. My first reaction to the professor after watching the video was that if the students are not paying attention, then maybe the professor is not interesting enough. However, that first reaction is not fair to all teachers. Sometimes, no matter how hard we try or how good a lesson, there will be a distracted student. It matters little whether this student is distracted by daydreams, tapping a pencil, or checking a post online. If the student is not engaged, often that means s/he is not learning.

Today, however, students are better able to multitask than ever before. While there is value in dedicating oneself solely to a task, expecting that of children for 6-8 hours a day is simply unrealistic. Anytime there are computers in the room, students will multitask. It is their nature. This gives us another chance to teach an important lesson: prioritization. Students must be able to rank tasks in order of importance. If your student thinks that the dance is more important than molecular biology, then we need to find a way to demonstrate the importance of the content area to that student.

Furthermore, let me explain how I function when I take graduate courses or attend conferences. I nearly always have my laptop. If not, I have a BlackBerry, an iPod Touch, or a notebook (rare). If the speaker is interesting, I am taking notes. If s/he is interesting, I am also posting questions and quotes to Twitter to get feedback from other teachers. If I find the speaker practically useful, I am simultaneously looking up links and resources on the topic being spoken about to further my own understanding. If the speaker is not

interesting or I do not care about what the speaker is talking about, I start to drift to computer activities that are less related. If all I have is a notebook, I start to brainstorm ideas on unrelated projects, make to do lists, etc... As a teacher not too far removed from where the students are, I've learned to prioritize. If what I am doing or listening to has a lot of value to me, I give it my full attention. Otherwise, how much attention I give the activity or speaker is directly proportional to how important it is to me. The kids need to learn these prioritization tools just as we need to continue to learn ways to make sure our class is a priority for them.

The sixth issue is the most difficult to eradicate. The Internet is slightly organized chaos. In that chaos, there are dangerous and inappropriate websites, information, and people. This is simple fact. The Internet has opened up the floodgates of information and no one can dictate the kind of information that is now available. If you have students use Facebook, Twitter, or Ning, there are groups of people that students, students' parents, and/or administrators may find objectionable.

This is not, in and of itself, a reason to disallow social networks in our schools. When students are on the job, they will have the Internet open to them. They will have to deal with temptation and inappropriate content. If we do not teach the students how to best respond, then we are doing them a disservice. We need to help students understand the contexts in which to use social networks; we must help them learn to navigate the Internet safely; and we definitely need to explain what to do when they accidentally come across objectionable material, because that will happen at some point. These are not hard lessons. It just requires that we spend time up front having honest discussions with students and reinforce those principles throughout the duration of the school year.

Instant Engagement

There are at least 5 types of social networks that will be discussed in this chapter. Out of all the social networks, the one that is the most widely used by far is Facebook. It is a good guess that many of your students are already on Facebook. In fact, at the time of this writing, Facebook has well over 300,000,000 people using its service. As a comparison, that is larger than most countries.

The gigantic installed user base is one of the main advantages that Facebook has going for it. For the most part, you will not have to convince middle and high school students to want to use Facebook. Most of them already use Facebook. I feel strongly that to take kids where they need to go, we first need to meet them where they are. Before we can start using Facebook in school, we need to understand why students are on Facebook. While this is by no means a comprehensive list, it does illustrate some of the key points.

- Their friends and possibly family are on Twitter. It allows them to stay connected.
- They can see what other people in the school, outside of their close circle of friends, are doing. It is important to students to stay informed about what is going on in the school.
- It is a place where they can have fun. There are numerous games on Facebook that students like to play.
- It is a place where they feel they can be silly without judgment. They are a plethora of quizzes (Things like, “Which 80s sitcom characters are you?”) and other fun, social activities that let students share their results with others.
- It is a place for them to safely vent, express their emotions, and be themselves.

Remember, what feels safe to a student and to a teacher are not always the same

thing. As you start using social networking online, you may be surprised with how much students are willing to share online.

As educators, we need to somehow find a way to make learning part of the reason that they check Facebook so often. What I would caution you against is using your personal Facebook account, if you have one, with the students. The account you use with your friends and family should not be the one you use with your students. I say this because of the environment that we currently work in. Teachers have been fired for small things on Facebook. For example, in the last few years one teacher was denied her education degree (she was given an English degree) for a picture of her at a college party that a student found when she was completing her student teaching; another teacher was fired for a picture of her drinking alcohol that surfaced. Neither of these events warranted the consequences they received, but we must be aware of them. The smartest way to protect yourself is to not post them. If you are going to post personal details, make a dedicated account for that, keep it private, and only allow people you trust to become “friends” with you on it.

The next step is to create a “Fan Page.” This is Facebook’s terminology for creating a central place for something, such as a business, a product, an organization, or, in this case, a class or library. There are many ways that you can interact with students on Facebook. On the Fan Page, you can have discussion forums for extending class conversations. You can use other helpful applications, such as quizzes. Facebook is extensible, meaning that 3rd parties have developed applications that run on Facebook to make it more useful. You can even engage students with educational games, like Words With Friends, which is basically a Scrabble-type game.

When you use Facebook, kids are instantly engaged. You want to maintain that enthusiasm by keeping it a fun place for them that also allows for authentic learning to take place. It is not an easy line to walk, but it can be done. The main obstacle is that Facebook is blocked in many schools. You can still use it at home, but it may be more fruitful to consider one of the alternatives if Facebook is blocked.

Professional Practice (Twitter)

When I think of the best social network for me as a professional, I immediately think of Twitter. Other people would argue LinkedIn, but that network is of little usefulness to students. There are many great reasons to use microblogging with your students, but there are 2 that are relatively unique to Twitter.

First, educators often gather on Twitter to exchange ideas and to support each other. We often discuss what would best help students. Unfortunately, students are all too often left out of discussions about students. It is helpful for students to be able to take part in the discussion.

There are several advantages to this. It helps the relationship and the classroom environment when students can see that they are your passion. That is not something that students just believe; they must be shown and convinced. Letting them see how you talk to other professionals about ways to better do your job is enlightening. In addition, it is empowering for the students to let them partake in the conversation. I have had some students watch and then participate in the weekly #edchat conversations and it is wonderful to see how it affects them when they actually influence a real teacher. Students are so often disenfranchised that this is can be a real confidence booster.

Second, Twitter is an ideal network for niche markets. When there is a group of people who are all interested in the same idea, Twitter is an excellent vehicle for communication and growth. Twitter is not really the ideal place for generalists; it is when people have no focus or interest that their updates become mundane.

When students are working on self-directed learning, it is likely that at times their knowledge on a specific topic will surpass the teacher's. In these cases, seeking advice or knowledge from an expert is advisable. Millions of people from all different professions are on Twitter. Students can seek out and receive feedback from educated professionals that can help them to grow.

A Safe School Environment

Twitter and Facebook are concerns for administrators, teachers, and parents because they are public. Twitter is completely public, other than direct messages. Facebook offers varying levels of privacy control, but the default is to let everything be public. If you are concerned with protecting your students' privacy, there is another route that may be quite attractive.

Edmodo is the only social network that I am aware of that was designed specifically for schools. It is evident in the features that the developers had students and teachers in mind. Edmodo is somewhere between Twitter and Facebook in what it actually does. At its heart, it is a microblogging service. Microblogging is where people write short messages to each other.

The way it works is that you sign up as a teacher. You are able to create as many classes as you want. A class could be 1st period, Physics, or Key Club. A class is just a way to group the people who will be sending messages. For each class that you create,

you are given a code. Students are able to sign-up without an email address. This is one of the only services that do this. When students sign-up for Edmodo, they join your class with the code you were provided with.

Since only schools are using Edmodo, the risk of exposing students to nefarious people intent on harming them is much more minimal than with other networks. Other than safety, though, Edmodo provides some really helpful features. You can send messages to the entire class (“Remember, the project is due tomorrow.”) or to individual students. Students can also send messages to each other for discussion or for support, and what they write is publicly visible by you and the rest of the class. You can send the students files, such as a template for a lab report, and students can share files with each other and with you. You can give assignments and grades. You can send alerts to notify students about particularly important issues. You can even conduct polls to check for understanding. Edmodo is a dynamic, interactive environment that can really improve the learning environment in a classroom.

Your Own World

Sometimes, you want students to be in a public environment. There are advantages to that. Other times, though, it would be useful to think of your class as a social network; a microcosm in which they could safely work. Ning is a unique and interesting approach to social networking. Ning allows anyone to create their own personal social networks which others can join. You can leave it open to the public or only approve your own students. In this case, keeping it as a class space for your students and parents is probably wisest. Your class site would be <http://YourWebsite.ning.com>. So, you could have <http://mrbillscience.ning.com> or <http://room127.ning.com>.

Ning is very interesting because students can setup their own profile pages and blogs on the site. You can add discussion forums and news feeds. You really are able to make your Ning network as personalized as you do your actual classroom. Ning does lack some of the education specific features of Edmodo, like turning in assignments and giving grades, but it makes up for that in the power it gives you to customize the interface to the needs of your students. Edmodo is simple and anyone could learn it in 15 minutes; Ning is a little more complicated, but taking the time to learn it will yield excellent results. Districts occasionally block Ning because some people have started personal networks for objectionable content, but this should not be a problem if students are staying on the network that you made for them.

Call in the Experts

Skype is a very recognizable program. It is not exactly a social network, but it fits more closely here than in any of the other chapters. Skype allows for audio and videoconferencing. To people with the program installed on their computer or their smart phone, it is completely free no matter where you live.

Skype has tremendous potential to remove boundaries to learning. Similar to how students can seek out experts on Twitter, Skype allows for a much richer, more authentic interaction between people. Video conferencing allows the students to connect with a speaker in a way that is very difficult with only short messages.

Since Skype is free, cost is rarely an issue. A computer with a microphone and, optionally, an inexpensive webcam is all that is needed. There are so many situations where this could be relevant. English teachers and librarians all over the world are bringing authors into their classrooms via Skype for the students to hear and interact

with. Students building a bridge in physics could get feedback from a real engineer.

Students writing for the school newspaper could get advice from prominent journalists.

More often than not, people are willing to give of their time to help students.

Recently, I hosted a conference called [TeachMeet Nashville](#). It went by the hashtag #tmn10 on Twitter. As a first-time conference planner, I had some difficulty finding speakers. So, I naturally reached out to those I know are experts. I had an expert videographer and English teacher present on digital storytelling via Skype from New York; I had another a networking expert from Scotland present his doctoral research; a social networking expert from Long Island remotely participated in a panel discussion. These experts really added a lot to the conference and the educators attending appreciated the opportunity to speak with them. Putting myself in the place of the learner, I reached out to experts and was able to communicate and learn from them because I had access to this simple tool.

Examples

There are many examples that I could discuss, but one group of students from Van Meter, Iowa stands out to me. Shannon M. Miller, the library media specialist from Van Meter High School was giving a presentation on how students use technology at a conference I was hosting in Tennessee. Marcus Benton and Josh Porter (@marcusb23 and @Josh_Porter1 on Twitter) called Shannon on Skype during her presentation. The two young men explained how they use laptops in their classroom. The 100 educators in the audience were the learners and the students had been elevated to being the experts. They were poised and articulate when answering questions from the audience, all of whom were impressed by them.

Later, when Shannon was continuing her presentation, her students could be seen responding to her on Twitter. The students were actually watching her live, and both responding and adding to what she was saying. These were intelligent young students; social networks gave them an opportunity to demonstrate that intelligence, build their confidence, and help others.

From the Teachers

Melissa Smith and Mitch Skau will be contributing stories before publication. Email a story of your own to jasantbedell at gmail dot com if you would like to be included.