

8 Things Educators Can Learn from Social Media

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This is a summary of my presentation on 25 April 2012 entitled "Bridging the Gap between Educators and Social Media" at the eLearning Forum Asia 2012 held in Beijing, China.

Social media has penetrated our lives from blogs, wikis (e.g. Wikipedia), media sharing (e.g. YouTube), social networking (e.g. Facebook) and microblogging (e.g. Twitter). It is currently the most engaged activity online according to a Nielsen survey¹. How should educators harness the opportunities accorded by the rise of social media? What about addressing the issues and concerns?

Here's a list of 8 things educators can learn from social media:

- (1) **Welcome the Opportunities.** Social media is about openness and sharing – educators should embrace and use it. While some schools have tried to ban social media, they found it was ineffective². Instead of being engaged in learning, our digital native students got disengaged and resentful when cut off from their networks. Conversely, why not use social media in teaching? A study has shown Wikipedia to be more accurate than Encyclopedia Britannica³. Another study found Twitter to improve students' grades⁴. Resources available on iTunesU, YouTube Edu and Slideshare can be accessed by anyone free-of-charge. Perhaps in the future, students no longer need lecturers. Educators ought to consider redefining their roles as coaches, facilitators or courseware developers⁵.
- (2) **Understand your Audience.** Educators can learn a great deal about our students from social media. Your students might write blogs, tweet or update their status on Facebook. The best way to understand them is to go online and find out what makes them tick. In fact, some educators have found email or SMS to be passé, and that class announcements are more effective when made via Facebook or Twitter. Your students may find you more approachable if you know a little about Justin Bieber or Lady Gaga⁶, or can engage them in a game of Words with Friends or Draw Something⁷. Find out how creative they can be with the latest memes⁸, or discover that they can offer fresh perspectives to social issues discussed online. It's not surprising as they have been exposed to a connected world since young.
- (3) **Portray a Professional Image Online.** Educators today walk the fine line between protecting their privacy and portraying a professional image online. Some educators cope by creating a separate social networking account for

private use or adding students as online friends only when they graduate⁹. Set your own rules according to how comfortable you are. Behave professionally online as you would in real life. The bottomline is to have a consistent image. It is hard to be a nice person on social media if you are often grouchy and complaining in real life. The only difference is that on social media, what you complain about may leave a permanent record and may even go viral. It's a scary thought but let's face it - teachers are considered role models in real life, why should it be different online?

- (4) **Contribute and Collaborate.** In modelling good use of social media, it would be great if educators can also move from being consumers of information to being creators and collaborators. An educator as a creator may be someone who also writes a blog about his or her subject or shares about it in the form of photos, videos, podcasts or slideshows. Some knowledge of the technical tools are needed but Web 2.0 technologies have made it so much easier nowadays to create, edit and load contents. Alternatively, one can be a collaborator with students and/or with other educators working on joint online projects.
- (5) **Let Students Lead.** Social media can be an excellent tool for students' learning. By actually participating in the knowledge creation process, students learn the subject better. They can achieve a greater sense of accomplishment in seeing their work shared with the world, thereafter motivated to learn more. Besides, students gain valuable skills in digital literacy, collaboration and self-directed learning. The ideal task for students would be one that is able to mimic a real world problem, lends itself to an authentic audience, and allows for students' creativity. Other than academic subjects, students can also use social media to demonstrate care for the community or the environment or discuss about social issues close to their hearts. As educators, we ought to encourage students to play a leading role on social media, be it sharing of knowledge or starting online communities.
- (6) **Network and Build your Personal Brand.** Social media offer plenty of opportunities for educators to network via Facebook, LinkedIn or Twitter groups. Use it to learn from other educators or experts in your field of knowledge. Or one can use it to crowdsource for ideas or look for possible collaborators. In addition, educators can also use social media to share their expertise and build an online portfolio as part of his or her career or professional development. In other words, social media can become the networking and personal branding tool of educators.
- (7) **Use Tools to Become More Productive.** Social media has tools to help educators to be more productive. For example, Toodledo allows individuals to set goals and organise tasks on a to-do list; Evernote is a useful tool for note

taking; Google Docs is excellent for collaborating or collating survey results; Dropbox can be a repository for documents to be accessed from any computer with an Internet connection; Google Calendar can be used for managing schedules; Google Alerts and Reader are tools that can help educators monitor topics that they are interested in. In using social media tools, be very selective to avoid information overload. In the same way, push notification on mobile phones can also help educators keep abreast of what is on social media, but they may become annoying if not managed carefully.

- (8) **Teach New Skills to Students.** Although our students are born in a world that is always connected online 24/7, and where social media is a lifestyle, they may not have all the necessary skills to use the media wisely. As educators who came from a world before social media, we may be in a better position to point out some of these issues. Examples of such issues include issues concerning online intellectual property, protection of online privacy, building a professional public image, having basic respect for others, differentiating between facts, fallacies and opinions. And of course, teach students that life is equally exciting outside of social media.

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