



Class, Get Ready to Tweet: Social Media in the Classroom

By William Kist, PhD

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Electronic communication, whether through Facebook, Twitter, text messages, or even e-mail, has become part of the lives of hundreds of millions of people in the last 10 years. However, there are still many teachers who are nervous about using social networking for educational purposes, and there are still many schools in which students must completely unplug as they enter the school. One of the main reasons more schools have not incorporated social media into their lesson plans is worry over what parents will say. Although many parents use Facebook and Twitter themselves, a significant number of them are skeptical about the educational value of these social-networking tools. However, the tide seems to be shifting. More and more teachers are embracing social networking as part of the fabric of their classrooms.

One of my students recently said in an exasperated way, “I can’t remember all the passwords I have for all the blogs, wikis, and Nings I belong to.” She wasn’t talking about the social networking she does in her private life. She was talking about the social networking she is assigned to do at school! Increasingly, teachers are assigning students to blog, build wikis, take part in online discussion groups, and even use their cellphones within the classroom. I have been researching teachers who use new forms of technology in their classrooms for the last 15 years and have noticed a dramatic increase in numbers of teachers who are using social networking for educational purposes.

What exactly are teachers doing in the classroom with social networking? Here are some examples to help you visualize how teachers are using social networking and offer some suggestions about how you can be involved.

Blogging

Many teachers are instructing students to use blogs to keep an ongoing record of what they are learning. A blog can be set up using a free hosting site on the internet, such as Blogger or Typepad, or within a secure space sometimes referred to as an intranet, such as Moodle (www.moodle.org) or Edmodo (www.edmodo.com). Blogs offer students the chance to keep multimedia records, incorporating video and sound files, as well as images into their written record. The ability for students to comment on each other’s blogs allows classroom discussions to continue around the clock.

Wikis

If you’ve heard of Wikipedia, then you know what a wiki is—a website that allows readers to collaborate on building the site’s content. From the Hawaiian word meaning “quick,” a wiki can be set up easily on a free hosting site. Students can store everything from research papers to student portfolios on wikis and can share summaries or study guides for what they are learning. A wiki may be set up by a teacher for public viewing, but give editing privileges only to students through the use of a password. Wikis allow for online group work that extends the boundaries of learning beyond the four walls of the classroom. In fact, teachers are using wikis to house collaborative projects that are worked on by students in several different countries, taking educational social networking to a new level of interactivity.

Social media discussion groups

Online instruction is becoming more and more popular in K-12 and postsecondary education. People enjoy the convenience of being able to learn in the privacy of their own homes and on their own schedules. Many teachers are setting up discussion sites for student response to questions, and students may be expected to facilitate a discussion themselves. In some districts, students are allowed to use Twitter and Facebook for such discussions.

Using Twitter, the teacher might create a hashtag phrase that students would look for in the search function. If I were teaching an American literature class, for example, I might create the following hashtag phrase: #KistAmerLitPeriod2. When students in the class want to participate in the discussion, they would tweet a comment that included the hashtag #KistAmerLitPeriod2, for example, “*Moby Dick* is often called the great American novel.” #KistAmerLitPeriod2. The other students and I could then search within Twitter for the phrase “#KistAmerLitPeriod2” and up would pop up all the tweets that have been generated from class members. In this way, students and teachers are able to follow and contribute to the discussion.

Some teachers are also using Facebook to house student discussions. A teacher sets up a “group” within Facebook and directs students on Facebook to “like” that group. The group then becomes a site for posting everything from class schedules to discussions and changes to the syllabus.

Many districts block Facebook and Twitter, preventing students and teachers from accessing these sites from school. In such situations, a teacher may set up an online discussion group within a protected online space in Moodle or Edmodo. The bottom line is that teachers are using online sites and social networking to engage students in learning in a way that comes naturally to them.

Communicate about social media early and often

Teacher training programs in colleges and universities also are incorporating these innovative methods into their preservice training, as well as preparing new teachers to use them effectively in their own classrooms. One of the main issues we talk about with preservice teachers is the necessity of communicating with parents when beginning any kind of innovative project such as using social media at school. Parents need to understand what the project is all about and the safety procedures that have been put in place.

New technologies with social media as a vital and integral component are breaking our education system out of a very old paradigm of teaching and learning, and engaging students, educators, and parents to embrace the fact that most human endeavors will be shaped by technology. As more and more of these programs show positive results, all of us will begin to see formal education as something that can and should take place beyond the walls of a bricks-and-mortar school.

William Kist, PhD, is an associate professor of English education at Kent State University in Kent, Ohio. He is the author of The Socially Networked Classroom: Teaching the New Media Age and The Global School: Connecting Classrooms and Students around the World.

140
Tweets

350
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85
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1
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How parents can get involved with social media at school

- Experiment with social networking yourself. Many parents are already on Facebook and know how it works. But have you tried Twitter? Have you tried Pinterest? Have you signed up for and taken an online course? Greater familiarity will make you more comfortable with the projects your children are doing in school that involve social media.
- Consider taking part in an online discussion as a virtual guest speaker in your child's class. Social networking makes it easy for you get involved at school by answering questions or taking part in the conversation without having to take a day off work.
- Attend a PTA meeting in which one or more teachers who use social media speak about current classroom projects that use these technologies.



Garth Holman, a 7th grade social studies teacher at Beachwood Middle School in Cleveland, Ohio, uses multiple social media projects to connect his students with the world. Holman starts by having his students seek out community members who have friends and family who live outside the United States, and then arrange to interview these people via Skype. This contemporary version of the old “pen pal” assignment includes using Google Earth to pinpoint places that relate to their new international friend, including municipal buildings in their hometown and local geographical landmarks.

Holman's students also collaborate with students at another school to create their own textbook focused on world history, a wiki located at <http://dgh.wikispaces.com>. Students are assigned a specific curriculum objective and collaborate in designing and writing a wiki page that summarizes key concepts and includes relevant links, video clips, graphics, and Prezis (presentations using a cloud-based tool found at <http://prezi.com>). Students learn world history in a new way, as well as how to collaborate within a social medium. With thousands of international hits on the textbook to date, students are making connections with readers around the world.