**Social Media in Education:  
Balancing the Risks and Benefits**

**(or Don’t be Afraid of the Dark)**

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Social media is embedded into the daily lives of today’s youth and to ignore this reality is to do our students a disservice. It is important for teachers to acknowledge the pervasiveness of social media, (Zhou 2016). Hengstler (2016a) cites Project Tomorrow "Speak Up 2015 Findings: Social Media Use In and Out of School" (2015) which states that 51% of students in grades 6-12 would include social media in their definition of the ultimate school. Engaging students and making learning relevant means finding appropriate and safe ways to incorporate social media into an educational program. Nielsen (2016) cites several compelling arguments for educators to use social media with their students. Asher’s (2015) statement in *Making the Case for Social Media in Schools* illustrates that teachers are expected to be, if not experts, at least functionally literate with social media. If teachers are to be effective and engage students social media must be a part of their instructional design. It must be used thoughtfully so as to mitigate the potential risks and reap the most benefits.

What exactly are the benefits of using social media in the classroom? According to Project Tomorrow (as cited by Hengstler, 2016d) 35% of students use Facebook often, 60% use Instagram often and 76% use YouTube often. This speaks to the familiarity that students have with these applications and the attraction that they hold for them. Teaching requires a lot of energy. Is that energy best used resisting the lure of these tools? Or is it better utilized finding ways to incorporate this technology into our practice and teaching students how to use them effectively and responsibly?

We live in a global community. There is an increasing awareness that we do not live in isolation but are dependent on, and affect, others. McManus (2014) states that “social media in the classroom connects students to each another [sic], their teachers and their local and global communities in non-traditional ways.” It can also connect students with experts on subject matter (Asher, 2015) and enrich learning in ways unavailable only a few years ago. Tarte (2016) states that social media as a tool helps students move from simply consuming information to creating and then sharing their work. The power of the audience effect impacting the quality of student work has been documented (social facilitation, 2016). Thompson (2016) reports that difference in motivation and quality of work when going from an audience of zero to an audience of 10 is so big that it’s actually huger than going from 10 people to a million.

#### Why, then, have not all educators implemented the use of social media in their practice? Hengstler (2016b) cites fear and lack of knowledge as contributing factors. Educators are uninformed or misinformed about how they can use social media in their classroom and what their obligations are relating to protection of students’ privacy and obtaining informed consent. Many may not be familiar with British Columbia Freedom of Information and Privacy Protection Act (FIPPA, formerly FOIPPA). We tend to shy away from that which we do not fully understand. Concerns regarding the safety of students are also likely to contribute to educators’ reluctance to embrace social media in their practice. As educators in British Columbia we must be aware of tangible and foreseeable harm that might come to students under [our] care.” (Media Smarts, 2016) The public is bombarded with warnings about sexual predation and cyberbullying. The Internet is portrayed as a dark alley in which malfeasance and danger lurks in wait. Our natural instinct is to protect ourselves and our students by avoiding the potential risks presented by the Internet altogether.

There are, in fact, dangers associated with exposing oneself on the Internet. The research on the extent of this danger, however, is inconclusive. Much research suggests that the dangers have been grossly exaggerated. Theirer (2016) claims that fear of the perceived (and real) threats posed by social media has resulted in inflated rhetoric and comparisons to catastrophic events like 9/11, Chernobyl and home invasions. The existing economy of fear capitalizes on this base emotion and perpetuates misconceptions. Hengstler (2016b) quotes Wolnak et al, (2004) who claim“research about Internet-initiated sex crimes indicates that the stereotype of the Internet “predator” who uses trickery and violence to assault children is largely inaccurate.”Willard (2012 as cited by Hengstler, 2016b) reports that “the majority of sexual abuse is by acquaintances or family members.” Hengstler (2016b) again cites Willard (2012) who claims that statistically, students face greater dangers of sexual abuse from school staff. Most cases of abuse involve someone known to the child. In the case of cyberbullying, Hengstler (2016b) cites Willard (2012) who reports that the majority of hostile interactions (cyberbullying) involving students on the Internet are a continuation of (or in retaliation for) on campus events. This suggests that cyberbullying rarely occurs in isolation and can usually be addressed by resolving face-to-face disputes.

As educators we are held to a higher standard of behaviour. A 1987 ruling by the British Columbia Court of Appeals stated

*Teachers must maintain the confidence and respect of their superiors, their peers, and in particular, the students, and those who send their children to our public schools. Teachers must not only be competent but they are expected to lead by example. Any loss of confidence or respect will impair the system, and have an adverse effect upon those who maintain a standard of behaviour which most other citizens need not observe because they do not have such public responsibilities to fulfill* (Supreme Court of Canada, 1987).

There is also the reality that we are all human and make mistakes and social media has the potential to broadcast those mistakes and make them public. What happens in Vegas no longer stays in Vegas. There have been enough recent educator misconduct cases involving the social media, such as the Mark Classen case (CTV, 2007) involving a parent discovering a nude photo of the principal on a family website, to make even the most tech savvy educator leery about activity involving social media whether it be on a personal or professional capacity.

Access to technology and varying levels of skill with digital tools may also contribute to the lack of integration of social media and technology into lesson design. There is an assumption that in this day and age all students have access to the Internet. The reality is that there is still a pocket of students who do not. The digital divide still exists. The definition has changed slightly in recent years. It now includes not just access to a computer connected to the Internet but adequate bandwidth and digital skills to facilitate full participation in online activities (Hengstler, 2016c).

Incorporating methods to include those students without access to the Internet at home, or who opt out of online assignments (which is their right) requires additional planning and creativity on the part of the teacher, who is obliged to accommodate all students. [Hicks & Turner](http://www.ncte.org/library/NCTEFiles/Resources/Journals/EJ/1026-jul2013/EJ1026Longer.pdf) (2013 as cited by Hengstler, 2016c) remind us that “students in areas without access to tools of technology and the Internet will struggle to participate economically and politically."  If we are to close the digital divide it behooves educators to ensure that all students are provided with equal access to technology and provided with the skills to access and participate effectively in the digital global community.

The potential risks should not dissuade educators from embracing social media in their practice. It is not feasible, or even possible, to create an environment that is completely without risk. As educators we are not expected to create a completely risk free environment. That is impossible. We are simply expected to demonstrate that we have managed the risks and taken reasonable steps to protect the students in our care (Hengstler, 2016). As Hopkins (2015) states, you need not fear - you just need the proper social media plan and strategy for how it will be used. In her theory regarding pillars of risk, Hengstler (2016b) proposes that the perception of risk changes based on 5 pillars which include knowledge, skills and training, practice and experience, guidelines and policy, and confidence. As educators construct each pillar, the risk reduces. I contend that at present most educators do not yet have one complete pillar, never mind five. The question of whose responsibility it is to create teacher competency and confidence with digital media is not clearly defined. Teachers are informally encouraged to become technologically literate but plans and supports are not in place. Teachers are left alone in the woods without a compass to find their own way (as cited in Schrock, 2016). If they are lucky a colleague may lay down a few bread crumbs to lead them on the right path.

The SAMR model popularized by Dr. Ruben Puentedura was designed to enable teachers to design, develop, and infuse digital learning experiences that utilize technology. It categorizes the uses of technology in relation to educational task. The goal is to transform learning experiences so they result in higher levels of cognition and achievement for students (Schrock, 2016). Many educators are unfamiliar with this model and planned, intentional integration of technology is not part of their lesson design. As educators I would suggest that it is our obligation to provide students with any and all opportunities to heighten achievement and that must include social media. The risks can be managed. In conclusion, if an educator familiarizes herself with policies, performs due diligence in researching digital resources, obtains informed consent and educates students in the area of digital citizenship and incorporates technology with intention, the dark, fearsome alley of the Internet can be transformed into the yellow brick road that leads students on adventures of discovery to wonderful places.

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