

The Value of Social Media in Education

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Abstract

This paper will explore the pros and cons of incorporating social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter into an educational setting. The arguments for and against the use of social media in education will be examined on a global scale and then narrowed down to address a Christian educational setting. As such, the use of social media in both the local church and academic institution will be addressed. After assessing the pros and cons of such modern innovations and discussing their possible impact in the local church and academic institution, a recommendation will be made for educators to take a balanced and cautious approach to the use of social media. Throughout the course of the paper, practical examples will be offered to demonstrate what a balanced approach may look like in practical situations.

The Value of Technology and Social Media in the Christian Education

In the text *A New Culture of Learning* by Thomas and Brown, the authors promote the idea of implementing social media into the educational experience. The authors write, “Through the new [social] media, the collective serves not only as a kind of resource for learning but also as a kind of amplifier: It intensifies and heightens the process of learning by continuously relating it back to the personal” (Thomas & Brown, 2011). The writers assert that these online social environments are “... all group projects. No one dreads them, and no one has trouble evaluating them at all” (Thomas & Brown, 2011). The authors suggest that this online environment is superior to the traditional classroom because “... a student panics when she is called on in class, even if she knows the answer to the question ... because she is being asked to expose in public what had been until that moment a very private activity” (Thomas & Brown, 2011). Rather than accepting Thomas and Brown’s assertions at face value, this paper will attempt to weigh the pros and cons of technology and social media as it applies to the educational setting; specifically in regards to the Christian educational setting. Furthermore, should any value in the use of technology and social media be found, practical suggestions will be made for incorporating them into the Christian educational setting; both at the local level and in the academic institution.

Arguments Against Using Social Media in Education

Educators must take into account several concerns before implementing social media into their system of education. According to one Huffington post article, teachers who use online tools may be “exposing [students] to inappropriate material, sexual predators, and bullying and

harassment by peers” (Huffington, 2011). In response to these dangers, “State and Federal legislation has been proposed to curb the use of social networking in schools” (Huffington, 2011). While critics may “believe that regulating online activity is a violation of first amendment rights” (Huffington, 2011), it cannot be denied that such threats are real and have the potential to do serious harm to students. Furthermore, there is the issue of liability. It is one thing if a young person falls victim to such abuse because they voluntarily log into social media sites; it is quite different if a student suffers abuse when signing in for a mandatory school assignment. In such cases, the school (or the educator who ordered the assignment) may be held liable. One must wonder if the benefits of social media outweigh this very real concern.

Luce-Kapler, Sumara, and Iftody argue that such abuse is often the result of social media’s “propensity with which individual stories can be appropriated and disseminated without regard for the individuals who exist as the subject of the stories” (Luce-Kepler, Sumara, & Iftody, 2010, p. 536). The authors relate the story of the “Star Wars Kid” whose private video of playing with a toy light saber was posted publically by other boys in his school. The video went viral and eventually resulted in the child “drop[ping] out of school and spend[ing] the rest of the semester in a children’s psychiatric ward” (Luce-Kepler, Sumara, & Iftody, 2010, p. 536-537). This story seems to directly contradict Thomas and Brown’s assertion that the collective environment of social media is superior to the public environment of the traditional classroom. Thomas and Brown’s observation that the student in the classroom “panics when she is called on in class ... because she is being asked to expose in public what had been until that moment a very private activity” (2011) may be due to the fact that privacy is still respected in the traditional classroom while privacy is not respected in the online collective. One professor

chooses not to use social media in the classroom for this very reason; Paul Menard, an adjunct humanities professor says, “I’m pretty adamantly against using social media in my classes. I find that there’s enough confusion between the personal and the professional in the classroom as it is” (Blankenship, 2011). The case could be made that privacy is better maintained and more respected in the traditional classroom.

There is also the question of how social media impacts a student’s grades. According to an article by Jeffrey R. Young, “A researcher at [The] Ohio State University has found that students who use Facebook reported earning lower grade-point averages than nonusers of the social-networking service” (Young, 2009). The same study reported that students who abstained from using social media sites “reported spending more time studying than the Facebook users did” (Young, 2009). While those critical of the study argue that “correlation does not imply causation” (Young, 2009), surely there is enough reason to be concerned. When one logs into a social media site the entire internet is at their disposal. For a young student it may be difficult to resist the urge to explore sites of interest rather than focus on the subject at hand. Thomas and Brown write that learning in an online collective works because it “caters to an individual’s personal interests” (Thomas & Brown, 2011). It is impossible to estimate whether the benefits of learning in an online collective translate well to situations when a student is forced to study specific topics in that online collective. For instance, Facebook may lose its appeal when students are forced to use it to study anthropology or geology. In such situations, students may find it hard to resist the pull of the internet in a myriad of directions.

Finally, it is possible that some students will simply prefer their classrooms be free of social media. One student puts it this way, “I ... think it would be daunting to know that every

minute spent on a [social media] site used to connect with family and friends could be monitored by professors” (Topal, 2011). Topal’s concern addresses how much of a student’s personal and scholastic lives should be merged. She writes, “It’s very possible that the English teacher we must face daily would frown upon our misspelled comments [on social media sites]. Our grades could be in jeopardy. It may be extra credit one day and docked points for a lack of punctuating the next” (Topal, 2011). Topal’s complaint that teachers may deduct points for a lack of grammar on social media sites raises other concerns; do social media sites such as Facebook lend itself well to the world of academia. Where academics require extensive citations and often times peer-review, social media sites are a breeding ground for urban legends and unsubstantiated reports. It is possible that a student who speaks carelessly or fails to cite and quote appropriately on a social media site could be held responsible by a teacher even though the engaging in a forum not usually held to academic standards.

Summary of Argument Against Social Media in Education

Of primary concern is the real threat that social media sites may expose students to dangers such as cyber-bullying or sexual predators. Should a student engaged in a school activity fall prey to such dangers there is a question of liability. Is the school or teacher who assigned the online project responsible? In addition, the lack of respect for individual privacy in online environments threatens to negate any benefits that may be realized in collective learning. It can be argued that the privacy inherent in the traditional classroom is a benefit for students who wish to keep their private lives separate from their academic lives. There is also the issue that the use of social media may negatively impact a student’s grades. Students who struggle to remain interested in certain topics may find the appeal of the internet too much to resist when engaged in

social media sites. In such an instance, the very tool used to spark interest may serve to distract the student from learning. Finally, some students may simply prefer to keep their social media separated from their academics. Students may prefer their professors not have access to their private lives and may fear repercussions academically for engaging in activities that considered normal on social media sites.

Arguments in Favor of using Social Media in Education

It must be recognized that social media sites are nearly ubiquitous in today's culture. Current statistics reveal that "today there are over 550 million Facebook users alone, along with millions more using sites such as Twitter, Myspace, Plaxo, LinkedIn and others" (Browning, Gerlich, & Westermann, 2011, p.1). The use of social media isn't restricted to just students as one "survey revealed that more than 80% [of university faculty nationwide] use social media in some capacity" (Blankenship, 2011). The overwhelming use of social media seems to know no gender boundaries as "in the United States and Australia, unlike many countries, men and women use the internet in nearly equal measure" (Gerlich, Browning & Westermann, 2010, p.35). While there is some variance between the use of social media between teen-aged boys and girls, "girls ... are more likely to use social networking sites than boys (86% of girls ... compared to 69% of boys" (Gerlich, Browning & Westermann, 2010, p.37); it can easily be demonstrated that most people young and old use social media sites to some degree. With such an overwhelming presence, it should be easy to introduce social media sites into the educational experience. In most cases, students can use social media in the classroom while using sites they are already familiar with; "Without disrupting the flow of work in the classroom, the teacher and students can tweet questions and responses on the lesson and post photos or related sources with

hyperlinks. In this way, everyone remains on the same page with few interruptions” (Gerlich, Browning & Westermann, 2010. P.36). In other words, students arrive in class having already learned the skills needed to access social media sites; educators should tap into those skills.

In the same way that using social media in private life prepares a student for using it academically, using social media academically may prepare a student for life in the working world. Lauri Kurkela writes “Social media have begun to influence business and knowledge sharing practices in many organizations. Social media related competences are becoming more important for learners’ vocational growth and life-long learning” (Kurkela, 2011, p. 14). Trilling and Fadel explore the importance of the connection between the academic world and the working world when they assert that the United States has shifted from a "nuts-and-bolts factory and manufacturing economy to one based on data, information, knowledge, and expertise" (Trilling & Fadel, 2009). The authors' primary argument is that this shift from a manufacturing economy to a knowledge-based economy necessitates a shift in our educational system; "to have knowledge workers, every country needs an educational system that produces them; therefore, education becomes the key to economic survival in the 21st Century" (Trilling & Fadel, 2009). Thus, the authors present the methods of change that are necessary to the educational system. This seems to suggest that utilizing social media within the educational system prepares the student to transfer the skills learned to the working world. It is important for students to receive an education that prepares them to use the skills needed in today’s knowledge-based economy. Social media, it seems, plays an important role in that preparation.

Finally, the argument that birthed this paper must be included. Thomas and Brown argue that social media provides the student with a “collective [that] serves not only as a kind of

resource for learning but also as a kind of amplifier: It intensifies and heightens the process of learning by continuously relating it back to the personal” (Thomas & Brown, 2011). This idea of a social media collective does have the potential to change the way students learn. One teacher’s argument for having writing students create blogs is as follows: “Students aren’t just writing on a piece of paper that gets handed to the teacher and maybe a smiley face or some comments get put on it ... blogging [is] a way to get students into that mode where, ‘Hey, I’m writing this not just for an assignment, not just for a teacher, but my friend will see it and maybe even other people [will] stumble across it.’ So there’s power in that” (Kessler, 2010). It seems this social collective has the potential to inspire students to become stakeholders in their own education. Students whose work will be reviewed by peers and available to the collective have motivation above and beyond simply satisfying their teacher or parents. They will also feel a sense of empowerment when their work is accessed, utilized, and built upon by their fellow students.

Summary of Arguments in Favor of Using Social Media in Education

Social media is nearly ubiquitous. The overwhelming majority of people, regardless of age, are already involved in some form of social media. As a result, it is an easy transition to integrate these sites in the education system. Because of technology, social media can be seamlessly integrated into the classroom. Students can tweet comments, post videos, and share links all without disrupting the flow of the class. Teachers can respond to their students in the same fashion without disrupting the ongoing work in the rest of the classroom. Social media even serves to prepare students for like in the working world where work tends to be collaborative rather than a private enterprise. The United States has transitioned from a manufacturing economy to a knowledge-based economy. The business world needs the

educational system to produce students who are valuable in this knowledge-based economy and social media happens to introduce much needed skills to the students. Finally, the online collective environment of a classroom that utilizes social media gives students the inspiration needed to achieve. In the collective, a student's work is reviewed by his or her peers. The notion that fellow students will be accessing and reviewing their work will give student's the impetus needed to try harder than ever before. Students will become invested in their education in a way that the traditional classroom simply cannot mimic.

Weighing the Pros and Cons

The arguments for and against social media in the classroom both make strong cases. The advantageous are obvious. Students have the potential to learn and acquire skills that have never before been possible. At the same time, the dangers are real. Even if a student has only a slim chance of falling prey to such dangers as cyber-bullying or sexual predators, the risk must be considered and made a priority. In a perfect world, teachers and parents would work together to minimize such risks; however, most students do not live in a perfect environment. It is for this reason that I recommend a cautious and balanced approach to integrating social media into the classroom. Teachers who dive in head first with no doubts are the most likely to subject their students to danger. What follows are practical examples of how social media can be integrated into the educational system in a cautious manner.

Practical Examples of Educators Using Social Media Responsibly

History teacher Enrique Legaspi revolutionized his classroom by integrating the use of Twitter into classroom discussions. "A teacher for eight years, Legaspi said experience has taught him that a small group of students tend to dominate classroom discussions" (Simon,

2011). Legaspi suggests that Twitter has become the vehicle for shy students in his classroom to find their voice (Simon, 2011). In his class, students respond to questions by “tweeting” answers that are then displayed on a digital chalkboard (Simon, 2011). This technique would seem to prevent a handful of students from dominating in class discussions. One of Legaspi’s shyer students reports that this technique is “... a great way to get people to notice you ... [fellow students] see me as somebody now -- as an equal” (Simon, 2011). Utilizing Twitter seems far superior to other methods of social media such as Facebook or MySpace as it does not lend itself well to cyber bullying and other dangers inherent to social media. Though Legaspi found that only one of his students had used Twitter before the experience “... getting them started wasn't difficult. Students who don't have Internet-connected gadgets of their own can use the class computers” (Simon, 2011). Twitter seems to lend itself well to a cautious approach to integrating social media into the classroom. In addition, by following the Twitter feeds of students, educators can easily monitor activity to prevent bullying and other abuses.

Certain subjects, such as writing, seem to naturally lend themselves to the use of social media. Educators who are fearful of allowing social media to permeate their system may instead choose to use it sparingly and target it to these subjects. The Littleton Public School system in Denver, Colorado has effectively modeled this approach. Their program titled ‘Inspired Writing’ has employed the use of laptop computers and blogging software to creatively impart writing skills to their students (Warschauer, Arada, & Zheng, 2010). “Students [in the Littleton Public School system] talk about writing, write, and comment on others’ writing for a substantial amount of time during almost every school day, and they use new forms of social media to do so ... students publish their writings on blogs and wikis, discussing others’ writings through written

chat tools” (Warschauer, Arada, & Zheng, 2010). This writing education allows Littleton’s students to interact with one another and “involve[s] contact with outside experts” (Warschauer, Arada, & Zheng, 2010). Programs such as ‘Inspired Writing’ seem like a wonderful way for educators to dip their toes into the social media stream.

Educators also have a variety of social media tools to turn to as an alternative to sites such as Facebook and MySpace. These alternatives allow teachers “[to] move forward using social media tools truly suited for improving student performance” (Rivero, 2011). Alternative sites such as Edmodo allow users to “post classroom materials; share links and videos; and access homework, grades, and school notices” (Rivero, 2011) all in an environment secluded from the totally public sites such as Facebook. This aspect of “education-specific” social media sites is perhaps the most appealing to educators who want the advantages of social media without much of the risk. These sites allow educators to “go beyond web conferencing with web, audio, video, and social networking solutions for 21st-century education and training” (Rivero, 2011). When this description of education-specific social media sites is juxtaposed with Trilling and Fadel’s suggestion that education should prepare students for a knowledge-based economy, it is easy to see how social media can play a pivotal role in such preparation.

Finally, educators who are hesitant to use social media in the classrooms can grow accustomed to the idea by employing social media in other aspects of their system. For instance, “Most college admissions officers know by now that their target audience is very invested in the online world of social networking ... admissions officers are not only familiar with these networks but are starting to use them as well” (A.M., 2009). Colleges who wish to display to potential students that they are “cutting edge” can do so by implementing social media into their

recruiting techniques. Other educational systems are using social media to develop online professional networks for their educators; “the conversations that used to happen in the hallways or teachers’ lounges are conferences are now happening all the time on the Web, and the more conversations you can have about your work, the more you can develop your specific professional interest” (Lightle, 2010, p. 49). Teachers who are of the most use to their students are those who remain current in their field. Maintaining these online networks is perhaps the most convenient and efficient way for them to do so.

Applying Social Media to the Christian Education

Thus far, this paper has been concerned with social media as it applies to the general educational experience. While it has been shown that social media can be an important tool to be used at the educator’s discretion, the question remains of how it can be applied to the Christian education; both in the local church and the academic institution. Certainly, if social media is beneficial to educators in general, it can also be of use in the church.

Social Media in the Local Church

While social media may seem out of place in the local church, it has begun to carve out a niche within local bodies of believers. Several prominent pastors have begun using Twitter to reach out to their congregations and have succeeded in extending their influence far beyond the walls of their home churches. Pastors and Christian educators such as Mark Driscoll, Albert Mohler, and Rick Warren use a potent combination of Twitter and blogging to deliver the gospel far and wide. This technique can be used by pastors in smaller congregations as well who wish to minister to and engage their congregations throughout the week. Blogs seem especially suited for pastors to examine and explain Scriptures in depth. A pastor who engages his congregation using

social media enables his congregation to feel “better connected to the church” and “fosters better relationships between [church] members” (Steinbrueck, 2011). In most cases pastors simply lack the ability to influence their church members on a daily basis; social media gives them the ability to do just that.

Social media can also be used as an opportunity for educators in the local church to engage their classes outside of class time. Often times, Sunday school classes have a limited amount of time to cover the assigned material. Teachers who are willing to dedicate their time to their class can use social media to continue discussion that were cut short on Sunday. Educators can also use social media to field questions concerning Scripture. Such a connection with students is important for the Bible teacher. With all the Bible study tools available, the Christian is often left to sort through them on their own. It's very easy for the lay person be "carried about by every wind of doctrine" (Eph. 4:14). Social media has the potential to turn the tables and allow teachers in the local church to be more effective in educating their church members.

Social Media in the Christian Academic Institution

While it may be true that social media itself may be susceptible to ethical abuse such as cyber bullying or privacy issues, Christian academic institutions should recognize that these issues are not inherent in social media itself. In fact, allowing the use of social media in such settings provides students the opportunity to be good stewards of their online time while lending educators the opportunity to exercise influence upon their students. Having considered the options available for secular educational systems, it would seem reasonable to expect Christian institutions to take advantage of social media in much the same way. Students in the Christian classroom can benefit from social media in the same way others do by instantly submitting

questions, comments, videos, and files via social media. One particularly beneficial aspect of social media in the Christian education has been the rise of distance schooling. Christian schools such as this student's own Baptist Bible College & Seminary are able to employ social media to educate their students online; this is beneficial in the Christian setting because students are able to pursue their degrees without neglecting their local ministries. Social media would also be an effective way for institutions to remain in contact with missionaries it sends into the field. Christian academic institutions have much to gain from incorporating social media into their educational systems and should be a shining example for all systems to follow.

Conclusion

The concerns with using social media within educational systems are very real. Educators must take a definite stance against threats such as cyber bullying and sexual predators. These threats must be considered prior to implementing the use of social media in any system. Educators must also be aware that when applied inappropriately, social media has the potential to detract students from their education. Grades may suffer should students fall into the trap of using social media in nonconductive manners. However, it should be recognized that the benefits of social media are also very real. Today's students have the opportunity to learn in a plethora of ways. Social media provides immediate access to interaction with teachers and students, video, audio and information. If teachers can harness these provisions the results can be spectacular. Learning within a social media collective has the potential to inspire students to achieve while at the same time preparing them for the working world beyond school. Because there are valid

points both in the arguments for and against the use of social media in education, it is recommended that educators take a balanced and cautious approach.

Rather than charging unabated into the social media collective, educators should begin on a small scale by tailoring social media to meet certain needs by recognizing that some classes better lend themselves to the use of social media. Educators who wish to practice prudence may find it beneficial to utilize one of the many education-specific social media sites rather than asking students to create profiles on less regulated sites such as Facebook and MySpace. Educators can grow accustomed to the idea of using social media in the classroom by first using it to meet other needs. School recruiting is an area that can particularly benefit from the use of social media. In addition, professional networks of teachers can be established and maintained through social media in an attempt to keep all educators up to date on the latest trends and changes within their particular field of interest.

Finally, the use of social media should not be limited to just secular educational systems. Christians in the local church and Christian academic institutions alike can benefit from implementing the use of social media. At the local level, pastors and educators can extend their influence far beyond the walls of their church by using a variety of social media. The use of social media at the local level allows educators to shepherd their flocks on days other than Sundays. As a result, congregations will feel attached to their churches and experience deeper relationships with one another. Social media also provides pastors at the local level with the opportunity to refute false doctrine and assist their church members to sort through the various Bible study tools available. False teaching is prevalent on the internet and pastors and educators should take advantage of every opportunity to flood social media outlets with information that

finds its foundation in Scripture. At the institutional level, Christian educators should take advantage of social media in every way possible and set the standard for educators everywhere. Of particular interest to the Christian academic institution is the ability to utilize social media to educate students at a distance. This provides the institution the ability to educate Christians without removing them from their local ministries or missions opportunities. The advantage social media provides in such situations can only serve to strengthen the body of Christ.

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