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USING SOCIAL MEDIA TO ENGAGE STUDENTS AND FAMILIES

by LISA NIELSEN

Facebook isn't just for sharing status updates with your friends and family, and cellphones have more power than you may have realized. Find out how you can use today's digital tools to hook your students and build relationships with their families.

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OUR FAVORITE MUSICIANS, GAME DESIGNERS, AND CELEBRITIES ARE MASTERS AT INTERACTING AND ENGAGING WITH THEIR FANS USING SOCIAL MEDIA.

They know how to grab our interest even though there is stiff competition in the pop culture scene — and in our daily lives — for our time and attention. You can learn from their example by using social media to engage students and their families. If you only engage in one-way communication (think about the note in the backpack and no social media presence), you will be considered outdated and out of touch. On the other hand, when educators use social media to engage students and families, everyone wins! Families feel connected to what is going on in the school, students can better learn using the tools of their world, and schools shine.

Whether or not your students have Internet access away from school, there are many ways to use social media to build, strengthen, and grow relationships and academic achievement among all parties. Here are some ways to put this into practice.

Families with Internet access

It is an unfortunate reality that the digital divide exists. Knowledge is power, and without access to the Internet, students and their families are at a disadvantage. A survey is a great way to determine which families don't have Internet access. You can point these families toward community resources such as the local library, as well as extending access and hours for the school library. You may also consider connecting families to programs that support access, such as Connect2Compete, an

initiative of the Federal Communications Commission that offers millions of families who are eligible for the National School Lunch Program discounted broadband Internet access for \$9.95 per month, \$150 refurbished notebook or desktop computers, and free digital literacy training. When schools do their best to ensure families have Internet access, there are many ways social media can be used to support students and their families.

HELP YOUR SCHOOL SHINE WITH YOUTUBE

Your school community is doing great things — innovation fairs, spoken word events, dance performances — but in most cases, when the activity is over, the memories fade. At least, that's how it used to be. Today, this no longer has to be the case. When we talk about the ABCs in schools today, we have moved from learning the alphabet to “Always Be Capturing.”

Today's schools need to constantly capture the wonderful occurrences that take place during the year so they can share them with the world. Every school has a story, and it's the people within those schools who must take responsibility for sharing these narratives and owning their school brand.

Creating a channel on YouTube or another other video site, such as Vimeo, is a great way to capture what's going on in your school and build the reputation your school deserves. Johnny Bevacqua (@jvbevacqua on Twitter), the principal at St. Patrick Secondary School in Vancouver, British Columbia, uses his YouTube Channel at www.youtube.com/STPCouncil as a vehicle for parents to watch student council meetings, school plays, alumni memories, and their incredible welcome assembly.

SUPPORT LEARNING WITH EDMODO

It's no wonder some educators are uneasy with the idea of using social media with students. We've all seen the



sensational headlines: “Facebook gets teacher fired!” It only takes a minute to discover social media was what caught — not what caused — the inappropriate behavior that led to termination. Still, for many, using social media with students is uncharted territory, and educators may want to exercise caution when entering these waters. Edmodo (www.edmodo.com) is a terrific platform for doing just that.

Edmodo bills itself as a free and safe platform for teachers and students to connect and collaborate. Its Facebook-like interface is designed to get students excited about learning in an environment they know, using a platform that isn’t blocked in schools. Edmodo enables students and teachers to start or continue discussions, respond to polls, stay aware of assignments and events, and receive award badges for performance or behavior.

What teachers love is that even if a student is absent, they have access to assignments. No more time has to be spent explaining or excusing a missed assignment.

With us or without us, students are using cellphones for learning ...

Rob Zdrojewski (@MrZTechTV on Twitter), a teacher at Amherst Middle School in Buffalo, N.Y., keeps his students (and their parents) informed of grades and progress throughout the year with Edmodo. He says that the platform fosters engagement from families, even those who traditionally could not be as involved, because they are kept in the loop with what is happening within the classroom. When parents are involved, student achievement increases and everyone wins.

Learn more

Federal Communications Commission Connect2Compete Initiative

<http://bit.ly/FCCDocument>

Get more details about this federal initiative and opportunities for your students’ families.

Connect2Compete

<http://www.connect2compete.org/>

This site, available in English and Spanish, connects families with local, discounted offers for computers and Internet service.

STRENGTHEN THE HOME-SCHOOL CONNECTION WITH FACEBOOK

Facebook is a platform where parents already are, so creating a page is a great way to give them a window into what is happening in school. This is exactly what Parent Coordinator Sara Cottone of P.S. 46 in Staten Island, N.Y., did. She welcomes parents to “like” the Facebook page she created for them at <https://www.facebook.com/pages/PS-46-Parent-Coordinator/10057000004967>.

It also served as a lifeline during crises. Last spring, the school Facebook page was one of the few ways parents could communicate during Superstorm Sandy. When there was a bus strike, the page was a terrific vehicle for sharing planning and logistics information.

But the page isn’t just for use in times of need. It’s also used to update parents on trips, school performances, and other events like picture day. The page is interactive, too. Parents can leave comments, ask questions, and find out information. Cottone and other parents are always on hand to respond and provide feedback.

Families without Internet access

Not only are cellphones a convenient tool, but for many young people who don’t have access to computers at home, they are the only tool with which they access social media. Most people do have access to cellphones — the 2009 Cell Phone Nation Marist Poll said that 94% of households had access to one — which makes cellphones the best tool we have right now to bridge the digital divide. While many of us think about using laptops and tablets to access social media, even basic, text-only cellphones provide a smart way to engage in educational uses of social networking beyond the basic Facebook app. Here are some ideas.

HELP YOUR SCHOOL SHINE WITH TWITTER FAST FOLLOW

Your school’s students and teachers are doing great things all day, every day. However, we know when children get home from school, their answer to the daily question, “What did you do at school today?” is often lacking. You can change that with Twitter Fast Follow, which keeps parents in the know regarding all the terrific things happening at their child’s school every day.

Twitter Fast Follow is a simple way for people to get information they care about in real time. For example, let’s say you want to get tweets from Pi Lambda Theta, the publisher of *Horizons* magazine (@PiLambdaTheta). Just text ‘follow PiLambdaTheta’ to 40404.

The great thing is that anyone in the U.S. can receive tweets on the go, right on their phone, even if they haven’t signed up for Twitter. This allows families to follow the school’s account to discover what’s happening at the school assembly or being highlighted at the science fair. They can follow a class’s account to see what happened on the field trip. With Twitter Fast Follow, the terrific things happening at school are no longer trapped in the school. Instead, they reach the hands of parents, connecting them to their school’s and class’s most up-to-date information. Watch the video at <http://youtu.be/GyQz48V6UmM> to see how Chicago’s Locke Elementary School uses it.

Once you set up your account, don’t forget to spread the word. Include reminders to follow the school or class in various places, including signs in your school, a link in your email signature and on the school’s website and any blogs, and a line on school flyers and business cards.

SUPPORT LEARNING WITH TEXTNOVEL

With or without us, students are using cellphones for learning, according to a 2012 study on students’ use of mobile technology conducted by Tru, a global leader in tween and teen research. Despite the perception by some parents and teachers that cellphones are distracting to kids, this national study proves that children deserve more credit, as one in three are using their devices to complete homework and learn better.

Teachers who want to encourage reading and writing and allow students to publish for a real audience can do this right from students’ phones with Textnovel.com, a social network for authors and readers of serial fiction. It is the first English language cellphone novel website, allowing members to write and read fiction with their cellphones (or computers) by using text messaging, email, and online tools. Textnovel runs contests for fiction writers, allowing them to demonstrate the market potential of their work through its unique serial publication and voting format. Students have to be at least 13 years old to enter their contests. The novels are rated (G, PG, PG-13, and R). Students can upload illustrations and link to Twitter, and there are many settings to customize the experience and make it fit for your students.

Middle school language arts teacher Kathleen Ray says Textnovel transformed her classroom. Before Textnovel, revising was always a frustrating endeavor. Students wanted to be done with their work after writing a first draft. However, when using Textnovel, students became engaged because it reminded them of commenting, liking, and unliking on Facebook, one of their favorite activities. With Textnovel, the students use their phones to get the input they need to truly revise their writing. The improvements were obvious, so they also learned about the value of revision. The social aspect that Textnovel brings to writing and revising made all the difference in Ray’s class.



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STRENGTHEN THE HOME-SCHOOL CONNECTION WITH CELLY

While we know that parents wish they could spend more time at their child's school, busy schedules often don't provide such opportunity. Parents can stay connected with a service like Celly (<http://cel.ly>), a free group texting service. Group texting saves time and improves communication. The cells referred to in Celly are instant mobile networks. With Celly, you can have open group chat, one-way alerting, or a hybrid where curators can approve messages.

Celly also provides security and privacy, because phone numbers are never exposed and there are controls. Cell curators filter messages before they are sent to the group. This keeps discussion on topic and reduces abuse, impersonation, and cyberbullying. Celly also has a built-in polling feature, complete with the tabulation of results.

Social networking provides a powerful platform for learning and connecting.

New Milford High School Principal Eric Shenninger (@NMHS_Principal on Twitter) in New Milford, N.J., suggests introducing services such as Celly during parent-teacher conference nights. It's a great way to elicit feedback during presentations or to secure real-time input on school initiatives. Once parents are comfortable with its use, the stage is set to continue using it and stay connected all year long.

Getting started

Using social media in education requires putting some building blocks for success in place. A strong foundation for successful use of social networking in education starts by securing parent/guardian and student agreements. As you develop a home-school connection by incorporating social media into parent communication, you will set the stage for parents to see the devices as useful tools for connecting in important ways.

Consider having a workshop for parents and students to introduce your use of social networking and to secure these agreements. This not only lays a strong foundation for your teaching practices, but it also provides a platform for teaching boundary, privacy,

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and safety practices to both parents and students. Hot issues such as cyberbullying, sexting, and cheating should also be addressed. Teaching appropriate ways to behave, means of reporting, and tools for protection, along with cellphone etiquette, is useful for both parents and students.

The next step in the foundation is developing an acceptable use policy, or what some call a responsible use policy. Consider doing this with your students, and use kid-friendly language. This is basic good classroom management applied to the digital tools for teaching we have today. There are templates available in my book, *Teaching Generation Text*, and on my blog, *The Innovative Educator* (<http://innovativeeducator.com>). With the development of the

responsible use policy also comes the establishment of classroom management procedures, which should be developed with students. The possibility of technology and social media becoming a tool of engagement, rather than a discipline issue, will increase when good procedures with rules and consequences are in place. The classroom procedures should be practiced by students and shared with parents as well.

Social networking provides a powerful platform for learning and connecting. This is important not only as a part of the 21st-century educator's toolbox, but also as a vehicle to provide more opportunities for students to use real-world tools. Children deserve nothing less than for their teachers to embrace the power of this technology and support them in becoming learners who can use the powerful social media tools and platforms to climb to new heights. EH

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