

Teachers and Social Media in the BC Context: Exploring the Boundaries

“For today’s teenagers, and anyone younger, online communication, sharing content, self-publishing and collaboration are not a new thing, they are “just normal” (Lenhart, 2009 as cited in Clark 2012) states Daniel Clark in his article [Social Media: Why This Matters To Everyone In Education](#). Clark proceeds to claim, “Over time, this will have a profound impact on education, and we need to start adapting.” (Clark, 2012). Kukela writes, “Social media related competences are becoming more important for learners’ vocational growth and life-long learning “ (Kukela, 2009). The 2010 ECAR (EDUCAUSE Center for Applied Research) study of undergraduate students and information technology revealed that students' use of social media has steadily increased from 2007 to 2010 and that the gap between older and younger student use of social media is shrinking ([Smith & Caruso, 2010](#) as cited in [Dabbagh & Kitsantas, 2012](#)) The 2010 ECAR data also revealed that college students are integrating social media in their academic experience both formally and informally. Hengstler (2013) believes that “when it comes to employing social media networking with learners, make sure you do it because you should”. As educators, we know we should be using social media but many of us are still hesitant. Much of that hesitation is due to the lack of knowledge about the benefits, challenges and risks of using social media to enhance learning. Hengstler (2013,) contends that “ our ability to make good decisions regarding the use of social media or social networking is based on our knowledge, training, experience and our confidence” (Hengstler,2013). Understanding the practical implications for teachers using social media in the British Columbia context involves not only defining the terms, but investigating what Hengstler(2013) calls “the boundaries” for educational use of social media which include: Digital Professionalism & Footprints, Privacy, Social Justice and Safety (Hengstler, 2013).

To define Social Media, it may be simply put as the sharing of content and interactions made by individuals in an online environment. Wikipedia’s (2013)definition of **social media** “refers to the means of interactions among people in which they create, share, and exchange information and ideas in [virtual communities](#) and [networks](#)” . If you search for definitions of Social Media on the web, you need only to visit Heidi Cohen’s blog post titled “30 Social Media Definitions” (<http://heidicohen.com/social-media-definition/>) to find one that suits your viewpoint. As many definitions as there are referring to Social Media, there are an equal number of applications and classifications for what many of us refer to simply as online sharing and interacting. Social media encompasses everything from the “billion active users of Facebook” (Wikipedia October 2012) to Edublogger ([http://theedublogger.com /](http://theedublogger.com/)), a simple blog for

educators using technology. While social media is prevalent in our daily lives and in the daily lives of our students, many educators do not feel secure enough to embrace social media to enhance learning.

As an educator, my use of social media as a teaching tool has been limited to a classroom wiki, building an online course in a blog format and creating individual websites and blogs with my students. For me, the use of technologies using social media was a way of engaging my learners. I tested the waters lightly with the use of social media in my classes. I used the proper permissions and monitored the wiki and blogs closely, uneasy at times due to the risk awareness associated with social media use. Hengstler (2013) describes the five critical characteristics of social media as: persistent, readily replicated and distributed, always on, searchable and with limited control. It is no wonder teachers are hesitant to jump into using social media in their teaching. As teachers, we often stick to safe and controllable situations and to shy away from situations that could possibly create red flags. A general attitude for social media we often hear is, "let the students do that at home on their personal time." Being aware of the basic characteristics of social content can better equip teachers to engage with social media in a safe manner. As Hengstler(2012) emphasizes, "One of the simplest ways to avoid disasters involving social media is to have a clear understanding of its nature" .

Along with having a clear understanding of the nature of social media, it is also important knowing that the basics about social media apply to both personal and professional use. It is commonly known that many teachers are hesitant to use social media in their teaching because they believe the risks are too great. Yet, many teachers are very relaxed with social media in their personal lives. Having a greater awareness of professionalism on and offline and an active involvement in individual "digital footprints" (Hengstler 2012) can ensure educators a more positive experiences with social media use. Hengstler (2012) describes a digital footprint as the "aggregation of all your digital activities in all the digital environments you navigate". Our digital footprint comes in three forms: passive, information collected about you; active, information volunteered by you; and second-hand, information others post about you (Hengstler 2012). Whether teachers are using social media in their personal lives or in the classroom, an awareness of their professionalism on and offline is crucial to their careers and longevity. The British Columbia's College of Teachers and the British Columbia Court of Appeal both agree that teachers "must lead by example" and that their "responsibilities as a professional extend beyond the end of the day" (as cited in Hengstler 2012,). It is not only our own digital footprints as teaching professionals that should be actively maintained, but our students need to be just as actively aware. Kuhlen (2010), Director of BCTF Research and Technology Division, claims "Our professional responsibility is not only to own our

professional online identity and reputation, but to understand enough that we can provide advice and be an online model for our students” .

Equally important to demonstrating an online professional identity to students is to address privacy issues related to social media use. Last year, I introduced the use of social media in my photography course. A class wiki was created for resources, and individual websites for e-Portfolios were created by my students using [Weebly](#). Mind maps were required to demonstrate the learning of key concepts with most of the students choosing to use [Prezi](#). Before using these social media sites, I contacted my principal and asked about privacy and permissions. I had heard of FIPPA (BC Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act) and was well aware (after switching to an American-based grading program at our school) that personal information stored on servers outside of Canada must have consent in writing. I specifically wanted to know what information I needed to provide to parents and students. My principal emailed me a list of information that needed to be included in a permission to be sent home to parents along with a [“draft letter”](#) to use. The Information in the letter home to parents described: the types of personal information to be placed on the web-based service; privacy and security policies of the web-based service (including the URL); options the students would have to protect their privacy and what the teacher would be doing to make sure students are aware of the privacy issues; how the teacher would monitor the student’s use of the technology; and alternatives for students whose parents do not give permission. Once my permissions were all handed in and a lesson on protecting students’ privacy was given to the class, I believed I had all the bases covered for using social media with my students and felt the class was ready to create websites, participate in a class wiki and use Web 2.0 tools for their presentations.

After reading Julia Hengstler’s(2013) [A K-12 Primer for British Columbia Teacher’s Posting Student’s Work Online](#), I was pleased to see that I had covered many of the considerations listed in the primer guide, but I was not as thorough as I should have been. Hengstler(2013) gives six considerations for posting student’s work online: 1. Copyright & Ownership, 2. Identifiability , Content and Risk, 3. Storage Location and Risk, 4. Explicit Informed Consent and Risk, 5. Safety and Protection Plan, and 6. Media Waiver Non-Coverage . While I had covered most of the first four considerations, the information I sent home was still not specific enough, leaving out some of the web 2.0 tools in use. In Hengstler (2013), Consideration Five pertains to a safety and protection plan. I had no such plan in place and was fortunate not to have any incidents with the social media tools I used all semester with my students. For what to include in a risk management plan, a teacher may refer to the “Privacy Guide to Faculty Using

3rd Party Social Media in Public Post Secondary Courses” (as posted in Blog post <http://jhengstler.wordpress.com/2013/05/17/a-k-12-primer-for-british-columbia-teachers-posting-students-work-online/>). Consideration Six addresses the existence of the use of a media waiver that may already be in use at your school. Hengstler (2013) recommends getting a signed statement from your administrator that the waiver is “considered applicable to the educators’ specific case” . As noted by Hengstler(2013), “a waiver alone would not meet the requirements of 'notice' and 'knowledge' for the informed consent required by BC regulations” (2013). Due to the importance of privacy and risk factors involved with using social media in education, I am amazed at how many teachers just “wing it” and either send home any reasonable looking waiver or ignore the waiver entirely. As we begin to move more widely into the world of social media for educational purposes, it is reassuring to know the [‘K-12 Primer for British Columbia Teacher’s Posting Student’s Work Online’](#) is available. What needs to happen now is a district-wide adherence to the guidelines with teacher education of the laws and regulations in British Columbia all educators are required to follow.

If district-wide adherence to the guidelines for the use of social media is needed, a Province-wide attention to the social justice issues of what is termed as the “digital divide” is imperative for our youth’s future. In Wikipedia(2013), the digital divide is described as “the economic inequality between groups in terms of access to, use of, and or knowledge of information and communication technologies” (ICT) . Goodman (2013) states that the “digital divide” is often used to discuss the connectivity gap among distinct regions and demographics. My awareness of the digital divide goes to the extent of knowing it exists and that many individuals are at a distinct disadvantage when it comes to jobs, schooling and intellectual advancements if they do not have adequate access to broadband width for internet use. What I was not aware of was the expanded definition of the digital divide that looks at internet access as a “starting point” (Warschauer & Matuchniak, 2010, 181). Warschauer & Matuchniak (2010) sees the digital divide “residing in the ability to use new media to critically evaluate information, analyze, and interpret data, attack complex problems, test innovative solutions, manage multifaceted projects, collaborate with others in knowledge production, and communicate effectively to diverse audiences”(2013). If providing a computer with access to the internet was a solution to the first definition, [Warschauer & Matuchniak\(2010\)](#) have given educators, and the world alike, a much bigger focus for solving the “new” digital divide. How will this impact our Canadian culture, in particular our Aboriginal peoples, in terms of educational change needed to overcome this new digital divide?

As important as the issue of the “new” digital divide is to our future learners, the issue of safety with social media use continues to be at the forefront. For the purpose of this discussion, the definition of “safety” used will be “the control of recognized hazards to achieve an acceptable level of risk”, as stated in [Wikipedia](#), (Wikipedia,2013). Hengstler, (2013, Safety Boundaries,D2L) explains that “safety is inextricably intertwined with perceptions of risk”. [Microsoft](#) (2013) outlines potential risks to online activities into three categories: content, conduct and contact. Content risks include inappropriate (sexually explicit, racist, hateful comments), inaccurate (biased, outdated and misleading information) and stolen content (pirated software)(Microsoft, 2013). Conduct risks are viewed as cyber bullying, inappropriate sharing (sexting, revenge porn) and reputation (digital footprint)(Microsoft, 2013). Contact risks involve online predators and online grooming(Microsoft,2013). As mentioned earlier, teachers who are hesitant to use social media are those most likely to focus only on the risks without clearly addressing how they can be handled. Hengstler (2013, Safety Boundaries, D2L) believes “our perception of risk changes based on what she calls the '5 Pillars of Risk': Knowledge, Skills and Training, Practise and Experience, Guidelines and Policy, and Confidence”. Educators who are fearful of technology and the dangers of social media will only contribute to the condition Adam Thierer(2012) calls a “[technopanic](#)” mentality (Thierer,2012). Thierer(2012) sees the “technopanic mentality increasingly on display in debates over online child safety, privacy, cybersecurity, and even copyright policy” (Thierer, 2012). As educators, it is our responsibility to be knowledgeable about the risks and benefits for social media use and incorporate them into our curriculum. Teaching and modelling digital citizenship to our youth are going to prepare them for their futures in our ever-changing digital world.

Exploring Social Media’s role in education and its use by British Columbia teachers covers boundaries of digital professionalism, privacy, social justice and safety. Along with those boundaries, we should not be under-estimating the importance of social media expertise. In chapter 6 of *Every Day Practices of Online Social Networking* (Lankshear & Knobel 2011), the importance of social media expertise is highlighted. Howard Rheingold(as cited in Lankshear & Knobel 2011) introduced “network awareness” and “identifies it as an important early twenty-first century literacy”). Network awareness means “understanding network ‘architecture’ and control” (Lankshear & Knobel 2011). Knowing how the internet works, understanding the government policies and laws, being able to navigate through social networks to decipher important connections, collaborations and resources join together as a social networking literacy that is becoming widely accepted as “social learning” (Lanshear & Knobel 2011). The notion that “social learning” is being recognized as literacy in our educational world and is being seen as a powerful source to enrich the future lives of our students means, as educators, we need to enhance

our “Network Awareness” (Lankshear & Knobel 2011) and be bold enough to incorporate social media into our classrooms. Justin Tarte (2013) says it best in his blog, "10 Reasons we need social media in education" (<http://www.justintarte.com/2013/07/10-reasons-we-need-social-media-in.html>), "If you say you are preparing students to be successful in the future regardless of the path they choose, **you have to include digital citizenship and digital branding into your curricula.**"

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