Social Media in the Classroom

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Abstract. Many educators choose not to participate on social media websites. I believe this is due to the lack of rules in online environments, leaving an impression that they are unpredictable and uncontrollable. It is also apparent that respectful engagement isn't always the case on social media websites. Trust and privacy issues thus counter the freedom offered by social media. This impression may have an impact on how educators approach incidents of cyber-bullying. I believe that anti-bullying campaigns and education offered in schools would be more effective if educators integrated digital citizenship with the aid of social media into their daily classroom lives.

Keywords: social constructions of knowledge, curriculum design, social media.

Introduction

I have a theory. It's an emerging conceptual development of what I believe education is for and what it could be. My theory is based on the premise that children are constantly constructing knowledge based on their environment and the discourse they are surrounded with; this discourse is not limited to face-to-face interactions. Today's discourse is a combination of real and virtual worlds that intertwine in students' lives and cross boundaries of formalities between what is acceptable behavior and what is not. I also believe that left to their own devices, students form understandings of society based on the discourses they are exposed to and the reaction of others while they witness this discourse. Egan (2003) notes that, "in all human societies, children are initiated into particular modes of making sense of their experience and the world about them" (p. 9).

Foundational curriculum figures such as John Dewey and Jean Jacques Rousseau, celebrated the exploration of the child as a natural phenomena and criticized a more stringent approach that limited their ability to learn from their own experiences. This curriculum argument has continued into the 21st century with a long standing debate of what should be taught and how. Although it has become universally acknowledged that students require skills regarding digital citizenship and the ethical use of technology, a clear understanding of how that should be taught is still under review. What I am proposing is a radical curriculum design that embraces the use of social media

in the classroom and places the problematic discourse under a microscope for dissection and discussion with the teacher as the mediator and facilitator. Egan, (2003) suggests, "to know what the curriculum should contain requires a sense of what the contents are for" (p. 14). In this paper, it is assumed the purpose of education is twofold: primarily to keep students safe, and secondly to prepare them to live in the real world. My curriculum theory is based on a need to "search out relationships among the phenomena and relationships among the relationships" (Beauchamp, 1982, p. 24) found on social media websites.

Social construction of knowledge, dialectical constructivism or even social constructivism (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989; Rogoff, 1990) is a "direct reflection of Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory of learning" (Applefield, Huber, & Moallem, 2001, p. 37). It is devised from the notion that knowledge is constructed through social interactions, and these interactions allow individuals to "refine their own meanings and help others find meanings" (p. 37). In the case of social media, students are constructing knowledge as they witness events and discourse streaming down their computer screen. I propose as educators we have the opportunity to allow them to experience this within the safety of our classroom, and furthermore, we allow students to engage in a discussion about what is occurring. In so doing, we, as educators, help to monitor their social constructions of knowledge and have the opportunity to re-phrase, redirect or offer alternative perspectives when complex situations arise.

Building Community in the Classroom

One of the benefits associated with using collaborative work in classrooms is the possibility of also building knowledge communities. (Brown & Campione, 1990, 1994; Drucker, 1986; Puntambekar, 2006; Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1994, 1996, 2006; Slotta & Najafi, in press). The idea of building communities of knowledge became of interest last century but now, in the 21st century, encompasses the use of Web 2.0 technologies. If social media is seen as a Web 2.0 technology, and collaborative discussions emerge regarding what students witness online, the use of social media in the classroom could potentially help to build knowledge communities as well.

Terwel (1999) suggests that students face challenges when attempting to acquire knowledge, and these are attributed to "prejudices, naïve concepts, misconceptions, subjectivism, solipsism and uncommitted relativism" (p. 198). Using social media in the classroom followed by group discussions, allows students to challenge their perceptions and beliefs by forcing students

to rationalize their thinking. Additionally, the classroom environment encourages students to work collaboratively, to discuss their thoughts and actions, to monitor and occasionally challenge each other's behavior. In fact the importance of discussing the behavior in the moment and environment in which it occurred is of the utmost importance. Pontecorvo (1993) relates to Bruner (1966) when he states, "cognitive development, in its overall definition, cannot even be interpreted outside a culture, i.e., outside the emotional, educational, and social mediations which make it possible" (p. 295).

In order to construct knowledge from social interactions, it is necessary to question, challenge, inquire, reason and explain thinking and/or actions. The justification of behavior and thought has been shown to be a "crucial tool for learning to reason and to explain" (Pontecorvo, 1993, p. 293). Social interactions between children reveal much more than their thinking, they also reveal their emotions and situate each learner within their own personal contexts. Beyond this, as students begin to contribute to the discussion, both support and opposition arise. Furthermore, "oppositional interaction supports children's efforts to produce 'good' arguments, to make explicit certain passages, and to go deeper into the meaning of the discourse" (p. 302).

What it Means to be Human

What does it mean to be human? The answer to this question inevitably involves the making of mistakes, and encompasses various interactions with others in our environment. What does it mean to be intelligent? One might suggest intelligence is developed when one learns from their mistakes. Kincheloe (2003) believes to be educated involves personal transformation. Therefore, one could surmise he believes the purpose of school is "to realize that the nature of the interactions in which the self engages actually changes the structure of the mind, and with this education it is imperative to act on self and world in a just and an intelligent manner" (p. 48).

Historically speaking, many curricular theorists have already laid the foundation to support the use of social media in the classroom through their experience-centered, humanistic and radical curriculum designs. John Dewey believed that children "exist in a personal world of experiences" (Ornstein & Hunkins, 2013, p. 166) and that their "spontaneous power-their demand for self-expression- cannot be suppressed" (p. 166). Furthermore, he believed children's experiences should be analyzed by educators, since it was these experiences that shaped their knowledge. Additionally, Jurgen Habermas wanted teachers to function as "awareness makers" (p. 167), who

"emphasize that education's goal is emancipation of the awarenesses, competencies, and attitudes that people need to take control of their lives" (p. 167). Finally, Carl Rogers suggested educating students in environments that encourage "genuineness, empathy, and respect for self and others" (p. 168); further stating that "individuals able to initiate action and take responsibility are capable of intelligent choice and self-direction, where mistakes are accepted as part of the learning process" (p. 168). The idea of blending feelings with knowledge emerged in the 1970's with the notion of "confluence education" (p. 169) a combination of both affective and cognitive domains.

This type of learning and teaching is not without challenges. One of the most obvious would appear to be the ability of an educator to fill the multiples roles I have outlined above. While some facilitators may feel comfortable with an intellectual approach, many would shy away from being a moral, spiritual or emotional leader for their students. The objective relationship that helped to remove any blurring of lines between teachers and students, helped to keep political and religious agendas and backgrounds out of the educational movement of the 21st century. However, is it necessary to paint a completely black and white picture of the role of an educator in today's classrooms? At what expense has the separation of church and state cost the humanistic development of students? How do we, as educators, facilitate change or help students to navigate real world problems if we are unwilling to wade into the water with them?

Conclusion

Many educators choose not to participate on social media websites. I believe this is due to the lack of rules in online environments, leaving an impression that they are unpredictable and uncontrollable. It is also apparent that respectful engagement isn't always the case on social media websites. Trust and privacy issues thus counter the freedom offered by social media. This impression may have an impact on how educators approach incidents of cyber-bullying. I believe that anti-bullying campaigns and education offered in schools would be more effective if educators integrated digital citizenship with the aid of social media into their daily classroom lives. Furthermore, I believe this approach to teaching requires teachers to step into an uncomfortable area, where real world problems, and emotions intertwine, but where the possibility of truly making a difference in their lives can be found.

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