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Everything has Changed: Thoughts on *Education and Social Media*

When new technologies—information technologies—emerge, educators have a very predictable response: They reject it. This is, of course, a quite rational response:

- Clayton Christensen is well known for describing disruptive technologies and the rejection expressed by those whose entire work life (and even world view) is deeply embedded in the “old” technology.
- New technologies are sometimes adopted first by marginalized populations, or for unsavory purposes.
- Educators are also quick to adopt the “precautionary principle;” thus they reason, “Until we are sure this new technology is best, we will continue with what we have been doing.”

In the 21st century, social media has followed the narrative implicit in the reasonable rejection of new emerging technology. When I talk with educators (either in K-12 or in community colleges) about social media, I can predict their responses:

- “What do I have to blog/ tweet about?” (“Um... homework assignments... resources for your students... interesting connections to your curriculum... happenings in your classroom—just be careful about FERPA... games... resources for parents... book reviews.... If you are teaching, you have plenty to share.”)
- “I don’t want students to find me outside of school.” (“Yeah, that is a problem... have two accounts... one for your professional life that students connect to... and another for your private life.” This does point to the problems of identity in the social media world, but that is a topic for another time.)
- “It is just silly stuff on those sites.” (Much of it is, but many of your colleagues are creating a vibrant community in the “twitter/ blog/ pinterest-sphere. You should join. It is fun and free and useful. The silly stuff will never be overtaken if thoughtful professionals do not contribute.”)

Some educators have, of course, been more accepting of social media than others (I refer to the vibrant community above), and they share and support one another in both ephemeral and ad hoc and long-standing and consistent communities. This book is an impressive collection of essays prepared by scholars and practitioners who are familiar to and trusted by readers of the professional literature; these authors have taken to the keyboard to share their observations of education in the strange new world. In these essays, they examine and explore the effects of social media on our students, our classrooms, our profession, and our culture.

The 15 essays are organized into three parts: New Opportunities for Education and Social Media, Challenges and Disruptions, and Social Media in the Coming Decade. These do accurately link the essays and these themes do thread through all of the essays, but I am struck by three themes that emerge from the collection.

The Digital Divide Persists

When computers first arrived in schools, they were the domain of “rich, white, males;” access to computers was limited for those who lived in poverty, minorities, and females. While access to devices has increased, we learn in these essays that access to excellent technology-rich curriculum and to the educational benefits of good and well-used technologies are not as widespread as devices are. We see examples throughout that not all screen time is the same, and purposeful planning remains a key aspect of teaching.

Further complicating the digital divide for scholars and practitioners in the United States are the realities of the digital divide on a global scale. We learn how India is working to increase access to information technology and we learn about the role that University of the People is playing to provide access to global communities. We see that these efforts matter to those of us who live geographically distant, but culturally (and economically and politically) close, to those populations.

We Have Much to Learn from Others

Educators’ reluctance to adopt social media means we have some catching up to do if we hope to become leaders in the field of social media in society. We can learn from organizations such as the BBC who has negotiated the role of social media in modern journalism, and they are taking an active role in supporting journalists learn to consume and use social media in a responsible and ethical manner. We also have a corpus of educators whose work to support their students, their colleagues, and themselves exists and they are open to new members, and they have much to teach those willing to learn.

It is common knowledge (actually we learn in this collection that it is a common myth) that youngsters are too willing to share information online. When we look

more closely at what youngsters do online, especially in situations where we play an active role in helping them understand the issues and we take an active role in modeling responsible online activity, we find they are much more responsible and private than the myth leads us to believe. We have much to learn from our students.

Social Media is Challenging Much that We Believe

Social media appears to be placing access to information and learning communities squarely on the desks (and in the laps and in the pockets) of our students, and they are finding friends and interests that are leading to active and sustained informal learning. The reality of this “hanging-out and “geeking-out” does seem to pose a serious challenge to the intense focus on standards and outcomes that focus so much interest in classrooms. Standards and outcomes place a rigid external locus of control on education; the message is, “students shall learn what outsiders determine.” (It is frustrating to me that educators have even given this locus of control over to those even further removed from the classroom, but that also is a topic for another day.) With social media, the message students are giving us is, “I have found a topic that interests me, and a community that values me. I will be an active learner there.”

Other social structures, like copyrights and the accreditation of schools, are also losing relevance in the landscape of social media. Actually, that last sentence is inaccurate. Accreditation, which is the method whereby we evaluate the degree to which an institution is prepared to do the work of educating its students, and copyright, which is the method whereby we ensure those who create intellectual property are financially rewarded, are still very relevant, but how these were instantiated in print-dominated culture are no longer meeting the needs of creators and consumers of knowledge.

Conclusion

The best way to evaluate research or writing or any other cognitive activity is by reflecting on questions you have when you leave the work. The works that leave the most interesting questions are the most valuable.

After reading these essays, I have no clear questions. For me, the problems are sufficiently cloudy that I am not sure what questions to ask, but the problems are coming clear. Just research problems support problem setting and question framing, the problems emerging from these essays will set and frame important questions for those who seek deeper understanding of education for the digital future.

Teaching in Information Abundance. Social media provides access to any information; facts, procedures, and algorithms are available to any individual with access to a network connect. Remembering and learning how to access such information in the pre-Internet days allowed me to develop sufficient expertise to be a very good (according to my evaluations) biology student in college. My teachers

were experts at dispensing to me the knowledge and skill needed to succeed when information was available in print (a limited medium).

These essays help readers understand that the education like I received is a far less value than it was. Education that follows the model of “dispensing information” approaches education as a commodity, and it leaves students unprepared for their futures. Because of social media, the problem of deciding what should comprise the curriculum and what experiences are educative are real and unresolved. It is coming clear that we must prepare our children to deal with far more complex problems and far less stable contexts than our parents did.

Understanding and negotiating curriculum and instruction that prepares students for the landscape of (effectively infinite) information on social media is an unresolved problem.

Shifting Foundations. Clear hierarchical relationships between students and teachers, the role of teacher as isolated expert, stable literacy skills, and well-established authorities as mediators of curriculum are examples of the structures and organizations that have served generations of educators that are being challenged by the landscape of social media.

Continuing to reject social media and the culture it creates seems an untenable position. Educators who hope to move “towards a digital future” as the subtitle of this collection suggests will be finding new footings in this landscape. This also points to the depth of the changes that the renegotiates will occur. In the landscape of abundant information, educators will renegotiate curriculum and instruction. These shifting foundations will cause educators to renegotiate what it means to be educated in this landscape.

Economy of Education. For me, the lynch pin of this collection is Daniel J. H. Greenwood’s “Technology and the Economics of Education.” I am aware of the role of deeper understanding as an asset to both individuals and to society. An individual with greater education tends to have a better life (as measured by what I value). A society with greater education also tends to have a better life (again, I value lower child mortality, long life, greater equity, fewer wars, and education is associated with these characteristics of society). From this perspective, education and the systems that support scholars as they create new knowledge, interpret and share the meaning of that knowledge are as essential as any infrastructure to society.

It appears that our society perceives education as an individual benefit. We encourage youngsters to become educated so they can have a good job, and we burden those who receive greatest education with the greatest debt. It appears, also, that social media is leading us to separate the work of teaching from the work of sustaining and developing knowledge. From this perspective, education is a commodity that can be obtained and transferred for individual good. Greenwood

and the other scholars in this collection appear to support the conclusion that education cannot be commoditized.

The digital future these authors appear to be pointing us towards is one with different, but very important, roles for educators and the educated. May we assume responsibility to build that future rather than having it foisted upon us.