

ETHICS OF TEACHING WITH SOCIAL MEDIA

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Abstract

This paper goes beyond the commonly held concerns of Internet safety, such as cyberbullying. Instead, it explores the ethical dilemmas we face as teachers when using social media, in particular social networks, in the classroom. We believe old ideas of respect and culture of care for children and young people need to be reconstructed around new media. This paper draws on the authors' experience in teaching with, and researching students' use of, social media in the classroom. In this paper we explore the ethical issues of consent, traceability, and public/private boundaries. We tackle the complex issue of the rights around virtual identities of the students followed by a discussion on the ethics of engaging students in public performance of curriculum and their lives. Finally we discuss the ethical dilemma involved in recognising and responding to illicit activity. While we reflect on our own response to these dilemmas and propose a dialogic process as the way forward, we also return to the argument that these ethical choices are dilemmas in which most, if not all, options are unpalatable or impracticable.

Introduction

Social media offer spaces for innovative teaching in classrooms. However they also pose a number of ethical dilemmas for teachers. While this paper pays particular attention to the concerns raised by social networking features of social media (such as epitomised by social networking services like Facebook), it also includes other web based media that mediate interactions between people, such as blogs (e.g., Blogspot), microblogs (e.g., Twitter), wikis (e.g., wiktionary.org), forums (e.g., minecraftforum.net), video sharing (e.g., YouTube), and image sharing (e.g., Flickr). Social media can also include virtual worlds (e.g., SecondLife) and massive multiplayer online role playing games (MMORPG) such as World of Warcraft as well as other Internet based games. In addition, many apps (applications) for mobile phone and personal devices (e.g., iPad) also fit the definition of social media, for instance, Localmind (an IOS app that connects people in geographic areas).

An important feature of social media is the way the texts are collaboratively constructed. A Facebook "wall" or Twitter profile page is not only made up of images, text and other media from the individual but also from those friends or followers who comment. Unlike early forms of digital word processing that supported a high degree of individual authorship, social media facilitates the joint production of texts. Due to the nature of the texts in social media, many of the texts are constructed by people with a particular sense of purpose and audience. Just as social media was not designed for classroom use to support curriculum and assessment, the content of most social networking sites was not designed to be used in the classroom. This does not preclude their use in classroom contexts, as demonstrated by the growing number of studies (Snyder, Henderson, & Beale, 2012; Wong & Hew, 2010), but it does raise ethical issues for teachers when (a) they use texts designed for different purposes and audiences other

Please cite as: Henderson, M., Auld, G., & Johnson, N. F. (2014). *Ethics of Teaching with Social Media*. Paper presented at the Australian Computers in Education Conference 2014, Adelaide, SA. <http://accec2014.acce.edu.au/session/ethics-teaching-social-media>

than their classroom, and (b) they encourage the creation of texts that extend beyond the control of the authors. Indeed, the ethical issues are largely founded on the understanding that both students and teachers have lifeworlds outside of school that are characterized by complex identities, social practices, and discourse that influence how they engage or disengage with each other and with social media texts such as Facebook.

Furthermore, social media, particularly social networking sites, have been the subject of considerable negative media focus in terms of cyberbullying and predatory behaviour that has stimulated a moral panic beyond issues of documented risk contexts (Green & Hannon, 2007; Merchant, 2011). This stigma has inevitably resulted in a tension when planning to use social media in a classroom. Nevertheless, there is a growing body of evidence that demonstrates, despite the risks, social media have a valued role in communication and the management of interpersonal relations, identity building, creative activities, and for learning (ACMA, 2009; Byron, 2008; FCC, 2009). As a consequence teachers are left in a difficult position of trying to innovate in their classroom using social media while at the same time being conscious of the risks. However, we argue that while risks such as cyberbullying have been well documented, and are addressed through numerous cybersafety initiatives, there are a range of other professional dilemmas in using social media in the classroom which have not been explored in detail.

While well-established guiding principles of ethical conduct in research such as justice, beneficence and respect (NHMRC, 2007) are relevant and valuable, we argue that there needs to be a more nuanced understanding of how they apply in new and complex technology-mediated social spaces. The choices and consequences are easier to identify in well-trodden fields. When social media is involved, available guidelines for our moral deliberation can be unclear, such as: who are participants, whose data is it, what is private, and what are the consequences for now and in the future (Henderson, Johnson, & Auld, 2013).

In the context of teaching with social media we need to draw on a broader, and less defined, set of ethical guidelines. We argue that from an ethical perspective classrooms are synonymous with the culture of care the teacher brings to the classroom. A useful guide is given by Nias (1999) who identifies six aspects of the culture of care in a primary classroom: affectivity, responsibility for learners, responsibility for relationships in the school, self-sacrifice, over-conscientiousness and identity. Lévinas (1979) also provides a useful frame for ethical practice in the classroom: he argued that all people depend on more than just themselves for life, sustenance, and education and we are continuously in an ethical relationship with the “other”. While this construct of “other” reinforces our notion of duty of care in the teaching profession, it is also relevant when trying to understand our ethical response to those others who have participated in the construction of the text, such as a Facebook page. For example, the texts the students access or bring to class might be a montage of authors that include different people in different places who have not provided permission for their texts to be unpacked in a classroom environment. In addition, social networking sites blur the boundaries between professional/school and personal lives, thus there has been considerable caution on the part of teachers and institutions.

We argue that there are four ethical dilemmas that need to be considered by teachers who are using social media content or services with their students, or who are planning on researching/documenting the use of social media in the classroom. In this context, we define ethics as a moral choice, which means that teachers have to ultimately decide their own response to the dilemmas, according to their socio-cultural and professional contexts. These are represented in Table 1 and have been organized according to well established ethical practice (consent, traceability/confidentiality, boundaries, and dealing with illicit activity).

Table 1
Ethical concerns for teachers using social media in the classroom or in research

Ethical issue	Ethical questions
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	Teaching with social media (adapted from Auld & Henderson, 2014)	Teacher as researcher (adapted from Henderson et al., 2013)
Consent	Do we have the right to colonise or marginalise students' out of school social networking practices in the classroom? Should we access students' out of classroom virtual identities from their social media in a classroom context?	When and how should we seek informed consent in an environment that promotes socially mediated and co-constructed texts, a sense of privacy in the crowd, anonymity through avatars, and in which personal data are increasingly leaving the control of the individual?
Confidentiality (Traceability)	Should we be engaging students' social networking in public performances of the curriculum?	The loss of confidentiality - how can we de-identify participation in an increasingly networked, pervasive and ultimately searchable dataverse?
Boundaries	Am I prepared for the inhabitation of my social media by students as a reciprocal response to my teaching?	Am I prepared for the inhabitation of my social media by students as a reciprocal response to my research activity?
Recognizing and responding to illicit activity	How will I negotiate any illicit activity associated with the student's use of social media?	What is illicit activity that requires intervention when in a socially mediated environment?

By raising these issues we do not want to dissuade teachers from using social media. Rather we are hoping to construct a space in which teachers are empowered to engage with the dialogue and implications surrounding the ethical dilemmas they encounter in their changing professional practice.

Consent – the right to colonize?

Consent concerns the respectful way to gain permission from people to engage with them in current or new practices and in gaining access to their data. There are a number of issues concerning consent that teachers face when using social media with their students. One issue with consent is what constitutes public data. While this appears straightforward when teaching young people, there is a debate about what constitutes private and public data. Rosenberg (2010) considers what is publically available on the Internet and what is perceived as public by the participants could be quite different. For example, if a young person publishes a video on YouTube for friends, they would not expect the same video to be shown in the classroom. Teachers need to ask what kinds of social media resources should they be using in the classroom when their producers potentially did not want, expect or perceive them as something for public consumption? To further complicate the issue of consent, boyd and Marwick (2011) suggest that young people do not have a full understanding of the long term implications of posting to social media. Obviously teachers need to consider the original purpose and audience of the intended text when asking consent to use these texts in class.

Another issue with consent involves the possible decontextualisation of the text in a classroom environment. Bakardijeva and Feenberg (2000) argue for a concept of 'non-alienation', where the content of online communication is not taken out of context of the original occurrence without explicit permission. When teachers use social media alienated from the context where it is produced, the students in the class are not provided with the postings or comments that have gone before and after these texts were made. The narratives that teachers make about the use of social media in the class could be rather different to the comments that have surrounded the production of the texts in the original form produced in the social networking sites. Teachers should unpack whether it is ethical to participate in, or expect access to their students' identities that they use in their social media as part of their learning process in the classroom. The use of social media in the classroom means that teachers need to extend Nias's (1999) construct of care, with reference to being responsible for relationships in the school. Teachers using social media are responsible for relationships with students and 'friends' outside of school mediated in the digital environment. When students do give consent for their images, texts and identities to be used in the classroom, teachers should be aware that this consent might need to be renegotiated at regular intervals. There is a real issue in determining participants' understandings of how their private information and interactions can be transformed into public data.

By including social media in the classroom context, we are implicitly requiring students to draw on their funds of knowledge around social media in order to succeed in the curriculum. While Moll, Amanti, Neff, and González (1992) have suggested that utilizing the home practices of students in the classroom can lead to successful pedagogy, we need to also consider if we are colonizing a classroom with ill-matched and poorly understood use of social media that may lead to unintended consequences and which amount to an invasion of the out-of-school technological practices and identities of students. A review of the literature reveals that despite students' familiarity with social media, they are not experienced in, or necessarily enthusiastic about, using social media for collaborative curriculum based activity (Snyder et al., 2012). Certainly, students' propensity to use co-authored texts from social media in their personal lives is not a sufficient foundation in itself to use the technology, no matter the guise of "authenticity".

Traceability – the ethics of public performance

When we ask our students to tweet, blog, post, share, or co-construct their texts with the rest of the class, we are asking them to perform in public or semi-public arenas. In this situation we are faced with the ethical question of whether this practice is caring for the identity of our students. How can we promise students that their digital footprint (online conversations, interactions, personal details) will be confined to the classroom context? A significant feature of social media is that they create an archive of profile that persists over time. This is made all the more problematic as more powerful search capabilities make it possible to search out and collect the profile data of an individual across a variety of social media platforms, thereby making public a very different and potentially unwanted profile of a student that they have little or no control over. In addition, the way in which social media, particularly social networking sites, record, trace, connect, and publish with a degree of autonomy from that of the individual whose information is being used has led the International Council on Human Rights Policy to note, "Today, the 'private man' is a public entity... that he controls only partly" (2011, p. 65).

It appears that nowadays search engines are so powerful that almost every digital phrase is traceable. The International Council on Human Rights Policy (2011) consider we are all part of a 'dataverse' referring to the ubiquitous nature of the data surrounding our everyday lives and the access people have to this data. Teachers who quote people anonymously from social networking sites in a class may find students plugging extracts of the quote into search engines to see if they can find the author of the text. Even more worrying is that by encouraging students to use social media for learning purposes, in which we expect and celebrate student's taking intellectually creative risks, we are potentially reifying the students' identity for years to come.

Boundaries – teacher becoming public

A dilemma arises when the regulatory codes of conduct meet emerging technologies that redefine heretofore well-established boundaries between private and public, personal and professional/student, and even leisure and school/work. Teachers need to consider what the implications are for co-inhabiting spaces that are designed to connect people and share information. The two most obvious ethical concerns of social media co-habitation are (a) teachers sharing their private (out-of-school) identities and practices in their profiles with their students that might not be congruent with the expectations placed on them as professionals, and (b) students actively seeking contact with teachers on the networks and, in doing so, building a profile of the teachers that may be incongruent with expectations, or even place the teacher in a compromising position. These ethical concerns are valid both in and out of social media. However, the unique characteristics of social media such as anonymity of the browser, persistence of data including histories of social interactions, and simplicity of searching across networks have increased the potential risk for teachers

Whether teachers are using social media for personal or professional (i.e., to enable teaching and learning) reasons there is a risk of public scrutiny of their profiles, including students observing

aspects of what may be considered private lives. Furthermore, the definition of communication becomes problematic in this regard since social networking applications are usually historical, providing archives of activity that, in effect, are being communicated to students by the simple measure of allowing student access to their profile.

Social networking applications expose teachers' out-of-school identities and their networks to a greater degree of scrutiny by their students, colleagues, and school communities. An obvious answer to this problem is for teachers to choose to only engage with social networking applications that offer a higher degree of privacy and control. However, this is not always feasible, nor is it necessarily desirable, as it reduces the authentic context to a staged pretext. Another strategy is for teachers to create a social networking profile specifically for their professional work. While this resolves some immediate concerns, it still requires considerable thought and considerable maintenance (eg. removing "friended" students at the end of each year, cleaning out histories of interactions, including photos, etc.).

Recognizing and responding to illicit activity

If a teacher came across a piece of student's work which used an image of a well-known movie star or popular cartoon character, should the teacher consider this as illicit behaviour? Even though the risk of being sued is minimal, many teachers would dismiss these concerns and treat the process as a positive expression of identity (Henderson, De Zwart, Lindsay, & Phillips, 2010). The issue here is the publishing of material online, the extent of the readership and the student understanding of copyright that is promoted in the classroom environment. Before the teacher can respond to illicit activity, the teacher needs to recognize it. In the above example, how is the teacher supposed to know all the copyrighted images the students could be using in their classroom learning?

When dealing with social media it is not always easy to identify the key players (perpetrators, victims, regulatory or reporting bodies) or even the illicit nature of the activity itself (Auld & Henderson, 2014). For example, social media that allows the joint creation and editing of texts (such as in a wiki) can make it hard to identify the perpetrator. Moreover, there is a question of degree of illicit participation, for instance, if someone only edits the grammar are they participating in the illicit activity? The joint design, production, and distribution of social media texts makes identifying authorship problematic, let alone intervening.

Teachers will also come across students' work that are a montage of other texts. Does a teacher ask the students if any of the sounds from songs or video from movies have been illegally downloaded? If the students admit to the teacher they have illegally downloaded material, what should the teacher do? There are implications of reporting this to the school management as the act of reporting would undermine the respectful relationship between teacher and student. If the teacher does not report such activity, what is the student learning from the teacher about making moral choices about following the law? Students will learn understandings about the law and morality from the actions teachers do and do not take associated with social media in the classroom.

Concluding Comments

Drawing on our own experience, as teachers and as researchers of our own teaching practice, we have outlined four complex ethical issues associated with the use of social media in a classroom context. We have offered dilemmas surrounding ownership, use, and archiving of texts and images by teachers as they introduce social media in schools. Guidelines for teaching practice nor codes of conduct are wholly adequate in addressing these issues. This is partly due to the continually changing landscape of social media, and partly due to the fact that some of the issues, such as the ethics of colonizing student social spaces, are simply not directly addressed. We suggest that teachers (and students) should go beyond reference to guidelines, but consider their ethical relationship with the "other" (Lévinas, 1979) including those beyond the classroom such as 'friend' networks.

Although we argue that students' choice about sharing texts should be respected, we also subscribe to the notion that we can engage in dialogue with students about those choices. The very nature of technology, especially that of social media, continuously decontextualises and recontextualises personal information, leaving it "out of context" and available to misinterpretation (Mayer-Schönberger, 2009, p. 13). However, when students are encouraged to examine and critique their use of social media, such as Facebook, when interacting with the teacher or with fellow students, they are being asked to behave, converse, share, and self-regulate in ways that are different to their already established practices (Auld & Henderson, 2014). Merchant (2011) suggested that effective use of social media in a classroom context will involve learning from, about, and with social media so teachers have a better understanding of the practices associated with these texts. We argue that underpinning these practices are a set of ontological approaches that are motivated by respecting the other. Where teachers foster a dialogue amongst students and between teacher and student, they will have a strong foundation in their planning for social media in their classrooms.

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