

Developing Social Media Guidelines

Many of today's young people use social media not only to keep up with friends, but also to engage in self-directed, interest-driven, and collaborative learning activities (Ito et al. 2010). These practices generally come to a halt when young folks enter school doors, where the use of social media is often prohibited. It's not hard to see why. Schools have an obligation to protect their students. The social media tools that are used for learning can also be used for bullying and other destructive behaviors. On the other hand, schools are under a great deal of pressure to prepare students for competing and succeeding in a 21st century marketplace that is increasingly driven by social media and a participatory culture.

Having it both ways. Can we construct guidelines that give students access to increasingly essential 21st century social learning tools while also maintaining a safe learning environment? Even better, can we teach our students to foster and manage a safe learning environment for themselves? Not only can we do these things, we must. Start by examining your school culture. What works in a small rural school may not be appropriate in a large urban setting, and vice versa. How are social media tools already being used by students, teachers, parents, and administrators? Are there exemplars that can be shared? Exactly what are the fears? How can they be addressed?

Put the learning first. The key to developing effective and meaningful guidelines rests in framing them in a learning context. Rather than writing guidelines that enumerate what students are *not* allowed to do, write guidelines that explicitly state the desired learning goals that technology enables. Present information literacy skills as an essential school value, and types of digital media as the tools used to learn those skills (Ahn, Bivona, DiScala 2011). In other words, write goals that employ the use of new technologies for the promotion of information literacy and critical thinking rather than writing goals that merely restrict technology use to approved activities. Does this mean that anything goes at school? Of course not. We need to be guided by the culture of our schools and the communities we live in. At the same time, if we create guidelines from the perspective of actual learning goals, we are more likely to ask "why not," when it comes to consideration of social media tools, rather than "why." It is important to remember that many tools that were once forbidden in schools are now allowed, even required. Schools already allow many types of technology use that were once on forbidden lists, from pencils with erasers to smart phones.

Policies vs. guidelines vs. procedures. Are you writing a policy or are you writing guidelines? In most cases, policies (such as acceptable use policies) are likely to be considered binding legal documents. They are also the documents most likely to enumerate the "do nots" – the activities and behaviors that result in disciplinary action. Guidelines, on the other hand, can be just that – they can guide practice, offer useful suggestions and alternatives, and instruct. Just make sure that any written guidelines do not contradict written school or district policies. Then there are procedures. Procedures address the nuts and bolts aspect of policies; policies are more general expressions of philosophy and intent. Procedures can be changed more easily than policies, making them more responsive to changes in technology.

A team effort. Don't try to create guidelines by yourself. Have a team that includes teachers who use social media and teachers who do not. Consider asking a few students, parents, and other stakeholders to join the effort. Make sure everyone is on the same page when it comes to learning goals.

Study up. Today there are many examples of how social media is being used in schools and examples of district acceptable use policies. There is no reason to reinvent the wheel!

Address the behavior, not the technology. Don't treat technology use differently than the use of other educational resources. Guidelines that present access to technology as a privilege assume that it can be taken away. But we wouldn't take a textbook or a pen away from a student for misuse of those tools.

Let the sun shine in. Be sure the development process is transparent. As drafts are written, share them widely and provide opportunities for input. In the case of district-level documents, keep the school board in the loop.

Reflect and revisit. Don't let the policy get cold. Review it on a regular basis. Make sure the terminology is general enough that it won't date quickly. At the same time, make sure that new game-changing technology is incorporated.

Resources

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