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The Psychology of Online Behavior: Capturing the Power for the Classroom

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The prevalence of discipline incidents involving technology in schools is dramatically on the rise. It is distinctly because schools have failed to capitalize on social technologies that today's student has a one in three chance of being the victim of an unwanted sexual or threatening digital communication. Our current practice in schools is to ban access to cell phones, social networks, and other interpersonal technologies. We provide students no guidelines or modeling of an appropriate online presence. Many schools have abdicated their responsibility to prepare students for the future by clinging to a model for learning that is rooted in practices developed decades before the digital opportunities of the connected world. Best practice demands that we not only prepare our students for the world that they will live in, it requires that we adapt these technologies to improve our own classrooms.

The prevalence of discipline incidents involving technology in schools is dramatically on the rise (NCES, 2008). It is distinctly because schools have failed to capitalize on social technologies that today's student has a one in three chance of being the victim of an unwanted sexual or threatening digital communication (NCNEC, 2009). Our children are not prepared to safely participate in their highly connected world as current practice in most schools is to ban access to cell phones, social networks, and other interpersonal technologies. We provide students no guidelines or modeling of what an effective and appropriate online presence should look like. Many schools have abdicated their responsibility to prepare students for the future by clinging to a model for learning that is rooted in practices developed decades before the digital opportunities of the connected world. Best practice demands that we not only prepare our students for the world that they will live in, it requires that we adapt these technologies to improve our own classrooms. By doing so, we will not only improve our pedagogy, we will have the opportunity to model appropriate and safe online behavior.

The reason that adolescents are drawn to digital communications such as texting and social networking sites is rooted in adolescent brain development. The prefrontal cortex of the brain is responsible for executive thought. It is where we make predictions, execute judgment, and rationalize decisions. Until recently, little was known about the adolescent brain. We now know that the teenage brain is not simply that of a little adult. In fact, the prefrontal cortex does not fully mature until humans are into their twenties (Giedd. 2004). This means that it is not only the lack of life experience that mitigates the adolescent's judgment; it is the physiology of their brain. Adolescents do not have the fully realized capability of predictive, rational thought.

Walk into any place with school age children and you will often see students engaged in using their phones to send messages to people that are sitting nearby. Texting is powerful because it removes all of the social cues associated with conversation. When people talk to one another, there are various non-verbal social indicators such as facial expressions, eye contact, and body language. People also have self-reflective considerations such as, is the other person listening? Do I look OK? What is she thinking? For the adolescent, where self-esteem and self-confidence may be tenuous, texting allows for communicating without these social cues. These social indicators also mitigate the school experience for our students.

Classroom discussions are dominated by the academically or socially adept. Students with poor self-esteem or low academic ability will not participate in class discussions even with a master-level teacher facilitating the process. But there are technologies available that allow all students to contribute via an anonymous text or post. The shy student and social pariah can actively contribute to a classroom discussion even on controversial topics by using technology that removes the social barriers to participation. Some educators may argue that this process is a crutch because enabling the student to share anonymously does not actually teach them how to advocate for themselves and communicate as they will need to when they are out of school. However, the child will never know they have something valuable to share unless we are able to help

them share. When in the current system do these children get their chance? Even if a student has exceptional intelligence, negative social interactions can destroy a child's ability to interact. Schools often fall into caste-like systems separating children because of race, disability, gender issues, acne, weight, size, income, hair color, or any number of focal points that speak to identity. Technology in the hands of a master teacher gives us the ability to level the playing field so that the social castoff has a voice. As children grow to understand the value of their own contributions, the need for the anonymity these technologies provide will reduce.

The modern master teacher must become adept at facilitating these types of learning environments safely by maintaining individual accountability and providing opportunity for contribution without social barriers. There are several technology solutions that readily present themselves as having both pedagogical and modeling opportunity.

Removing Social Barriers to Learning

Teachers should create online learning environments where a socially neutral screen-name or email account is assigned by the teacher to allow for anonymous communication to occur between students under the teacher's full purview. There are many current solutions available and our teachers must be given the time and resources to prepare these new learning environments. This process alone may engage entire disaffected populations of students to our essential curricula. We must caution against a swing of the pendulum to such a degree that all direct interpersonal communication is removed but the selective application of such readily available technology-enhanced interactions should be explored.

Connected Classrooms

High speed data access and the growing prevalence of video enabled chat make the environment for connecting classrooms across physical boundaries a much simpler process compared to even a few years ago. These connections can be used to bridge cultural divides, enhance the context of curriculum elements, and foster additional information resources. These interactions can be as grand as students connecting across the globe or as simple as having high school students mentor middle school students in their own district. We need to extend the definition of the classroom to encompass all the environments that can promote learning. The child who is out of school on an extended medical absence or family vacation need not be away from the classroom. Video enabled chat, podcasting, and even simple audio recording provide an extension to our classrooms that greatly enhances the opportunity for learning.

Alternative, Authentic Assessment

The latest generation of mobile technologies has put cameras and microphones in the hands of our children continuously. Teachers should be encouraging their students to document the connections of their personal experiences to their curriculum. Instead of a simple recall question quiz after a new concept is taught, have the student document their new understanding with a picture or video from their own experience. Students should be capturing the world around them and using that media to create generative products that demonstrate capacity. Instead of banning portable technologies, we should be embracing them and working with service providers to help us close the digital divide. Our students can capture the math problem on the board for later study, they can document a science phenomenon from the classroom in their neighborhoods, and they can record their commentary on world events as they occur. We are living in a world where many of our children can engage in digital creation and capture almost continually and we are not availing ourselves of these opportunities.

Publish Beyond the Classroom

Traditionally, students generate work for the eyes of the teacher alone. The Internet connected classroom allows for students to publish their assessment materials for the whole world. Instead of completing a traditional paper or speech, students could publish a podcast, blog, or media rich presentation that can be delivered to classmates, family members, or anyone, anywhere. Students must learn that their contributions have merit and that they are capable of adding to the social fabric. Additionally, these publishing technologies allow our students to interact with the work of their peers and through the process of tagging and coding, students can participate in higher-level thinking and critical evaluation of relevant topics. Each classroom can begin to create a repository of knowledge and information that grows over time.

Digital Portfolio

The concept of student portfolios has been around for decades but there were always problems of culling and storage. The digital age solves the logistics of physical portfolio management by allowing for the archival storage and tagging of nearly unlimited artifacts for each student. The growth of a child across any

discipline or skill set can be documented. Reading, writing, the arts, mathematics… anything can be recorded, scanned, or uploaded and maintained. Even beyond the evaluative purpose is the very real connection that the child can make to his or her own growth over time.

Associated Risk

The incorporation of these connected technologies involve adding additional risk to our student's lives. We cannot be so foolish as to blindly move forward without preparing ourselves to realize these risks. Most importantly, teachers and parents must constantly foster an environment where students can advocate for themselves. There is a reason that online social networks have devolved into an unsafe playground of illicit sexual and illegal activities. Children today are not more malintentioned than previous generations; we have simply given them more powerful tools without providing any guidance. We have sent our adolescents into this brave new world without any caring adults. Essentially, we've allowed our children to make up the rules for social networking. The reason some of the online social networks have decayed into a cesspool of humanity is that we are not there with them. Where are the teachers modeling effective communication? Where are the parents connected to their kids digitally? We have been so concerned about shielding our children from these potential dangerous social technologies that we have ignored the incredible opportunity.

Summary

The connected nature of today's student drastically changes our opportunity for teaching. The demands of teaching in a connected environment need to be addressed by the professional organizations that support teachers and administrators. The traditional teacher contract of the past does not recognize the time and expertise necessary to foster these developments into the learning experience. Instead of limiting our student's education to punctuated periods of standardized nuggets of curriculum, we must enable our teachers to apply their content and pedagogical expertise within these new media. The incorporation of social technologies into curriculum delivery and exploration is critical not only because it has the potential to fundamentally improve our student's connection to the curricula, but because not doing so is an abdication of our ethical responsibility.

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