Teaching Social Media at Lawrence High School

By Damian Bariexca, Ed.D., Supervisor of Educational Technology and Related Arts; Natalie Richey, Business and Social Media Teacher; and Andrew Zuckerman, Ed.D., Director of Instructional Services, Lawrence Township Public Schools

Students today have unprecedented access to social media. It is estimated that over 73% of students have smartphones (Lenhart, 2015a) (though anyone who has taught in a classroom recently would argue that number is much closer to 99.99%!). A survey conducted by Influence Central (2016) found that the average child gets her first social media account around age 11. Eighty-nine percent of teens are using social media (Lenhart, 2015b), with Instagram and Snapchat being the most widely used (NORC, 2017). Those same teens are spending nearly nine hours a day consuming media (Common Sense, 2015), and "children ages 8 to 12 are spending nearly six hours a day doing the same thing" (Willett, 2016, para. 3). In March of 2017, the average U.S. user spent five hours per day on her mobile device. This is a 20% increase from the year before (Perez, 2017). Our students are gorging themselves with information, and the trend doesn't appear to be decreasing any time soon.

Beyond being simple consumers of information, social media and Web 2.0 allow our students to contribute to the flood of information. The popular narrative around this tends to be framed negatively (e.g., more and more teens admit they not only regret some of their online posts, but that they have had to ask friends to remove posts because they didn't like them or they were too personal (Perez, 2017), but the flipside to this is that our students are also using this access to connect with creative communities and foster their entrepreneurial spirits. Access is widely available (albeit not for every child), but what our students may be lacking are structured opportunities in which to think critically about how and why they use social media, and

why doing so is important. It was with this thought in mind that the Business Department at Lawrence High School designed and implemented a course entitled Introduction to Social Media.

Lawrence Township Public Schools is a technologically progressive district that has embraced the use of social media for professional learning, culture building, and public relations. When a flurry of simultaneous retirements brought some unanticipated changes to the district's ability to staff existing courses, we turned problem into opportunity by shifting a position to another department and hiring an additional Business teacher. Introduction to Social Media came about as a result of needing additional curricular offerings to replace the ones that could no longer be taught. Given the role of social media in our society and how the district embraces its use to communicate with the local and global community, it was an addition that made sense.

The course is run as a semester-long elective (recently changed from year-long) out of our Business Department and open to all students in Grades 9-12. The scope and sequence (with approximate timelines, on a 60-minute block/drop schedule) is as follows:

Digital Identity/Footprint (Two Weeks)

In this unit, students are exposed to the short- and long-term impact posts can have on their digital presence, both negative and positive. Privacy settings, appropriate posts, and the enormity of how many people are actually online and the ways one small post can be seen by millions of people are discussed. Among other activities related to assessing their "Googleability", students aged 16 and older create LinkedIn accounts. This drives their names toward the top of Google results and is a first step toward establishing a professional online presence.

Historical Perspective (Three Weeks)

How did social media emerge from the "primitive" world of Web 1.0 communications and connectivity?

What factors lead to some forms of social media dying off (e.g., Friendster, Myspace) and others thriving (e.g., Facebook, Twitter)? Students explore how the social media world came into existence and analyze trends in order to hypothesize about the future of the format, and what implications that has for society, technology, politics, and business.

Legal & Ethical Considerations (Three Weeks)

What is the difference between behavior that is legal on social media and behavior that is ethical? Do the lines blur at all when we move from the online space to "IRL" (in real life)? Students explore and discuss the protections and penalties provided by laws, local school policy, and individual service provider Terms of Service Agreements, as well as how communities develop their own norms and how certain behaviors — whether legal or not — are encouraged or discouraged by communities. A favorite student discussion topic in this unit is the monitoring of social media accounts and personal mobile device contents by an authority figure (schools, employers, etc.)

Peer Presentations (One Week)

Students develop presentations to turnkey what they have learned about digital citizenship and social media to classmates who are not enrolled in the class. This typically ends up being one of the students' favorite projects of the year. Not only do they have the chance to teach what they have just learned, but they also supplement learned knowledge with personal stories and examples from their own social media experiences that tend to hit home with their audience.

Media Analysis and the Online Voice (Six Weeks)

Fake news, urban myths, and propaganda abound on social media and spread like wildfire. Students analyze and critique various forms of media and the many rhetorical techniques they use to confirm bias, convey half-truths, and otherwise promote an agenda, both political and non-

political. Students also analyze author's purpose by determining the credibility of sources and comparing, contrasting, and evaluating different writing strategies across various social media sites.

Business Applications and Engagement (Three weeks)

Students identify social media marketing practices and trends in business and how different services appeal to different demographic groups. They study how different companies use social media to promote themselves, identify target markets, and gauge the effectiveness of social media marketing campaigns.

Conclusion

While Lawrence High runs this course out of the Business Department with an emphasis on marketing in the latter portion of the semester, with some revision of focus, this course lends itself just as well to being run as an English, Social Studies, or Technology elective, at either the middle or high school level. So much of what the course can and does deal with has students grappling with big-picture questions of digital identity, ethics, societal movements, and the disparities between the evolution of technology and the evolution of the law that it would be right at home in any of those departments. Additionally, social media plays a role in so many current events that teachers will never want for fresh discussion topics or opportunities to expand the curriculum.

Social media, once the reserve of college students and techies, is now at the forefront of the global social, technological, and political landscapes. To disregard, ignore, or otherwise underestimate the importance of learning to navigate this form of media in a thoughtful, deliberate manner is to do our students a substantial disservice.

If you are interested in learning more about this curriculum or modeling a similar class in your district, please visit http://bit.ly/LTPS-SM to see our complete curriculum document.

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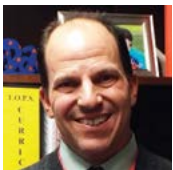
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