Planning Your Participation in Social Media Spaces

While participating in social media spaces can be initially intimidating for educators, carefully thinking through several key decisions and setting several good practices for yourself in advance can help make your work personally rewarding and professionally safe. Consider using this hand-out to begin planning your participation in social media spaces.

Key Decision

Decide whether to tie your online identity to your school or position or enter social media spaces as an individual.

For any educator, one of the most important initial decisions is whether to tie his or her online identity to his or her current school or position (the choice Patrick Larkin made when he se-lected @bhsprincipal as his Twitter identity and Burlington High School Principal's Blog as his blog name) or to enter social media spaces as an individual (the choice Jonathan Martin made when he chose @jonathanemartin as his Twitter identity and 21K12 as his blog name). Check the following statements that best describe your current position and your intentions for entering social media spaces. The column with the most checks will indicate which choice is right for you.

Tying Your Online Identity to Your Current School or Position

☐ My primary interest in entering social media spaces is to learn more about educational topics.

☐ I am comfortable being seen as an educator first and an individual second by members of my school community.

☐ I care deeply about modeling social media behaviors for the members of my school community.

☐ I care deeply about building an online pres-ence for our school that stretches beyond the borders of our community.

☐ My school community is active in social media spaces.

☐ My school community is critical of our school's current communication plan.

☐ My district allows me to freely share thoughts and ideas on education as its representative.

☐ Creating patterns of communication that can outlive my tenure in my current position is im-portant to me.

☐ My successor is likely to continue communicat-ing with important stakeholders in social me-dia spaces.

Entering Social Media Spaces as an Individual

☐ While I'm interested in using social media spaces to learn more about educational top-ics, I'm equally interested in using social media spaces to keep in touch with my family and to pursue areas of personal interest beyond education.

☐ I want to build a social media presence that I can take with me when I move to a new posi-tion or role in education.

☐ My school community is not particularly active in social media spaces.

☐ My school community is satisfied with our school's current communication plan.

☐ My district has yet to embrace social media spaces.

☐ My district carefully coordinates messaging efforts and discourages employees from ex-pressing individual positions on educational topics.

☐ It is unlikely that the successor to my current position will embrace social media spaces or continue building on the presence I begin.

Good Practices and Patterns for Participation

It is equally important for educators entering social media spaces to develop good online practices that are customized for their current situation. Answering the following questions can help you do just that.

One of the first steps that you've got to take in order to keep your participation in social media spaces professionally safe is to keep your supervisors aware of what you're doing online.

1. Which individuals in your system do you need to reach out to? What will be their initial reactions to your decision to join conversations in social media spaces? Why?

2. What evidence can you use to demonstrate the benefits of using social media spaces for communication and professional development?

It is equally important that you respect district policies and programs in your online communications. Being overly critical will anger members of your central office and leave your school's stakeholders confused.

1. Which policies and programs is your district most invested in? How does the general community feel about these policies and programs? How likely is it that your stakeholders will share criticisms with you about these policies and programs in social media spaces?

2. Which programs will it be difficult for you to be positive about in social media spaces? Which will you avoid talking about at all?

Any educator working in social media spaces needs to recognize that his or her private life only begins after walking away from the keyboard. Regardless of our intentions, content shared online is instantly permanent, replicable, and available to large audiences.

1. Knowing this, which of your personal interests, hobbies, beliefs, and opinions should you avoid talking about in social media spaces?

2. Is there anything about your personal interests that members of your school community might misinterpret?

Finally, educators working in social media spaces need to consistently maintain professional relationships with parents and students they interact with online.

1. How are the members of your school community currently using social media spaces? How likely are they to find you in the online conversations you join? What sorts of interactions can you anticipate having with these stakeholders?

2. What kinds of behaviors do you think will be important to model for the parents and students you interact with online?

Next Steps

Now that you've thought through the kinds of key decisions and good practices that can help make your work in social media spaces personally rewarding and professionally safe, it's time to plan your next steps, a process that begins by answering the following questions.

1. What is already happening with social media in your district? What trends do you see? Who are the stakeholders? Who shares your vision of what's possible? Who has the time and energy to be your partner in this work? What contacts and resources will you be able to tap into as you move forward?

2. How much time and energy do you have to invest in your efforts to integrate social media spaces into your work? Will your students have to pay in loss of your time and attention? What strains might there be on your professional relationships? What risks could emerge to your professional reputation? Is there an actual dollar cost involved in your plans?

3. How long will it take to build the outcome you envision? How will you measure progress? What intermediary deadlines can you set? What is a logical first step for you to take? When will you take it?