

The Positive Side of Social Media

Social technology trends can have a positive impact on student learning

By Regina McDuffie, Academic Dean



As I discussed with parents at a recent Scottie Talk, today's Lower School students have never lived in a world without the Internet. Recently, Dr. Jerry Weichman, a clinical psychologist specializing in teenagers and parenting teenagers, spoke to a St. Margaret's audience about parenting in the 21st century.

He expressed that, in today's multi-media-driven culture, social technology is part of the fabric of growing up. While social drama and acceptance are intensified by social networking sites such as Facebook, social production and social networking can positively impact teaching and learning.

"Social production" is the creation, copying, mixing and remixing of information available to anyone with an Internet connection (Stephen Wilmarth, 2009). Students see themselves as social producers or creators of information, rather than as simple consumers of information. They participate in adding to Web content through wikis, podcasts, blogs and video broadcasts. Social production is rooted in the 20th century philosophy of John Dewey: Students learn by doing. Web 2.0 provides students with the opportunity to be authors and collaborators, working with teams of people outside their classroom and their local community. Their knowledge base is grounded in the collective intelligence of the global community. Social production provides our students an incredible opportunity. For example, our St. Margaret's Middle School students and Upper School students practice social production when they contribute to class wikis on the Angel learning management system. As an example of this type of learning, some of our grade 5 students created a podcast of "eyewitness" accounts of the Boston Massacre as part of their unit on the history of the American Revolution. To read an article about this classroom activity, visit the Tartan Today online at smesnews.org/today and search for "podcast."

"Social networking," as with Facebook, is part of our students' tool kit for developing their identity and their relationships with others. Social networking is rooted in the 20th century scholarship of Lev Vygotsky and social learning theory: Vygotsky posited that we learn by interacting with others. It is true that we may surrender some aspects of privacy for the convenience of participating in social networks, but there is evidence that the gain from social interactions and peer-mediated learning is substantial. The implications of social networking for teaching and learning are expanding, as more teachers use social networks for professional growth and development. "The more diverse, global and

heterogeneous a set of networks that one participates in, the more learning that occurs" (Boyd and Ellison, 2007).

St. Margaret's puts these technologies to good use. Our faculty uses Techpaths curriculum-mapping software to network with educators around the world. Webinars allow our faculty to talk with and learn from lead educational researchers. Foreign language students create avatars to practice their communication skills. Across the divisions, students and teachers are exploring digital portfolios for sharing work and giving and receiving collaborative feedback. Together, we tap into the positive benefits of social media.



In a 21st century classroom, you might hear a teacher say, "Good morning students, please log on, open your blogs, and go to the class wiki," instead of "open your notebooks and copy this information from the board."