

### ***Social Media and the Classroom: What's the Big Deal?***

It seems like every time I turn around, there is a mommy blogger who has written about why teens' presence on social media should be limited and making you feel like a bad person if you have social media accounts. The ironic thing is that 99% of the time, I see these blogs on social media.

Everyone has an opinion about whether or not social media is bad for teenagers. However, almost no one ever discusses why social media is such a big deal--why it is so important to our students. I think the reason for this is because we cannot fully understand why it is so important. Many of us didn't grow up with it. Also, it's still a quickly developing area of our culture, and it's hard for many adults to keep up. So here are three reasons why social media is a big deal and how you can address it:

#### **1. Because it exists.**

That may sound like a cop-out answer but allow me to explain. In middle school, students are acutely aware of every little thing their peers like, talk about, wear, and listen to all the way down to what they eat and what kind of pajamas they wear. It was like this even before social media was in the picture. If your students started the school year with no social media, they started wanting a Facebook or Instagram or Twitter or whatever about 10:00 AM on the first day of school. Young adolescents are very "peer minded" and this stage in their lives is where they start gravitating more towards their friends than the adults in their lives. They value their friends' and classmates' opinions more than their families'. You could tell them that they don't need social media to be liked or have friends, but they will still want social media because their peers are telling them the exact opposite. This does not mean that you should parrot what their peers are saying. It means that they need a reliable, trustworthy adult reminding them that social media does not define who they are.

#### **2. Because instant gratification has inundated our culture.**

It's everywhere. Everyone has fallen victim to the need for instant gratification. "Hot and Ready" pizza, texting (and waiting impatiently for a response), email, shopping centers in every town, online shopping with next day shipping, "On Demand" television, Netflix, commercial-free Hulu--the list could go on and on. All of these have one thing in common: you get what you want (or need) the moment you decide you want it. *Instantly*.

Social media is no exception. Your students evaluate their identities based on their social media presence. How many followers they have determines whether they are popular or not. How many likes they get on their posts determine whether or not they are liked by their peers. Even how fast people *like* their posts is important to them. For your girls, how many likes they get on a selfie or a picture with friends determines whether or not she is pretty. *Instant gratification*. If they want to know where they stand with their peers, within minutes they can find out by posting one picture on Instagram. It's a big

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## Middle Grades Musings

deal when someone *unfollows* your student as he or she may automatically feel inadequate or not loved. A person could have 500 followers, but as soon as the number drops to 499, they are wondering why they aren't good enough, pretty enough, or cool enough to keep that follower and what they can do to change it. They'll thumb through their account for hours reevaluating the image of themselves that they have put online and how they can make it better.

### 3. Because social media connects them to culture 24/7.

This is one of the most important reasons of why social media is such a big deal. American culture is so fast-paced and changing that the only way to keep up with what's new, what's trending, what's hot and what's not is by being connected to social media. The only problem with this is that social media puts our already fast-paced culture in fast forward.

If your students are checking Twitter or Instagram during class, it's likely because they just *have* to know what's trending and who is dating whom and who broke up with whom because at school, they will have to already know this information. They'll just be left out if they come to school not knowing what happened overnight or over the weekend. You may think there's not a whole lot that could happen overnight, but you'd be wrong. Everyone has a cell phone. Everyone can text. Just about everyone has access to WiFi, and many kids stay up later than they should. That's when all of the good stuff happens. People get into arguments, so-and-so breaks up with so-and-so, and so-and-so starts dating so-and-so's best friend. Everyone will be talking about it; your students will feel that they need to have an opinion about what happened before they even get out of the car or bus at school. All of this might sound absolutely crazy and bizarre, but it's not. It's perfectly normal. It is the culture they have grown up in, and it is the culture that they have the power to change.

### The hard lesson

Teach them how to use social media in a positive way by posting pictures that inspire and have positive messages, by not commenting negatively on someone's post, and by teaching them that how many likes or followers they have does not define who they are and how loved they are. These are lessons that are hard to teach when all of the negative messages are hard-wired into their brains, but it isn't impossible. They need positive adult role models now, more than ever, to love them and support them. Most importantly, they need teachers to try and understand what they are going through. "It's not a big deal" is no longer an adequate response. **It's a huge deal.** We are teaching the generation that will one day be leading our country. It's our job to educate them, love them, and help their self-esteem be intact by the time they reach adulthood.

***We've got this. I know we can do it. ☺***

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