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Teaching Students about Their Digital Footprints

OUR STUDENTS LIVE in an online world. They're emotionally and physically attached to their devices and many of their relationships exist within technology. As educators, there are many ways that we have had to adapt to this changing landscape of communication within our teaching, and when I look around my institution, I think we're doing a remarkable job at keeping up with the rapid pace of change.

However, one area that doesn't get the attention it deserves is educating students on the digital footprints they leave behind. Footprints that can jeopardize their employment potential. A large part of our job as college educators is to ensure that our students have the skills to become contributing members of society working in their chosen fields. We give them content knowledge and skills and we may even impart some of our worldly knowledge, but we rarely think about their online activities and the long-term ramifications they can have on their ability to achieve these goals.

I have presented on this topic on several occasions throughout North America and I am always surprised by how little some post-secondary educators know about the functionality and privacy of certain social media platforms. At the most recent conference, one participant told my colleague and me that it was safe to send a photo over SnapChat because it disappeared after a set amount of time. I was astounded. [See: Snapchat admits deleted photos aren't really deleted.] We explained to her that this was certainly not the case and absolutely anything transmitted on your phone or the Internet can have a positive or detrimental impact on your future employability.

Scenarios such as this only confirm for me that instructors not only need more information on this topic but should also have a solid lesson plan in place to educate their students about online activity.

Below I describe several steps for creating a lesson plan that will aid in making the Internet a constructive tool for building a positive, online identity for our students.

- Explain that the Internet can be friend or foe. This may be simplistic but it lays the foundation for the entire lesson. At this stage I usually introduce my students to examples of individuals who have been fired due to inappropriate posts on Facebook, Twitter, etc. These range from top level employees to every day individuals. I teach in Canada, so I have them look at this website. There is also the infamous Justine Sacco case

- Have students Google themselves. I have been doing this since I began teaching in post-secondary education. Doing this will bring up all the good, bad, and ugly that they present online and that is available for future employers to find (Yale, 2015).

- Instruct students that having no online identity can be also be detrimental. Employers want to know something about the resumes that come across their desk. Having a visible and professional online identity can help students land their dream job. According to Forbes, employers have hired candidates because of something positive they have seen on a social media site and therefore… .'those who are silent or invisible online may be at a disadvantage' (Smith, 2013).

- Help them limit the potential for negative consequences. Have your students set strict privacy limits on all of their accounts. In some instances, deleting certain accounts may be the best option. Ensure that they are using professional emails for all communication. At no time is it appropriate to have 'beerguy10' as your email address or a moniker on any site.

- Finally, help them to create a professional and powerful online identity. The easiest way to ensure that they have at least one positive Google hit is to help them create a LinkedIn account. I walk my students through the set-up process and allow them to add me as a connection to start them off. This can be controversial but personally, as an instructor, my job is to help my students become employable. If someone in my network can help them, I am happy to help facilitate that introduction.

These steps are not foolproof and no matter how hard we try to preach about the pitfalls of irresponsible social media use, some students will never understand the impact their online identity can have on their future careers. However, following the five steps laid out above ensures that they have a better chance at presenting to the online world, a competent and professional demeanor. In turn, this can help them to land a job in their chosen profession. What better lesson could

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What Are We Communicatingto Students When We Write?

DO WE COMMUNICATE more with students in writing than we used to? I think so. In addition to the course syllabus, the usual handouts, and written feedback on papers, projects, and performances, we now share all kinds of electronic messages with students. We exchange emails, post announcements on course management systems, and participate in online discussions. Those who use PowerPoint tend to make rather text-heavy slides. And if you happen to teach online, then virtually all your communication with students occurs via some written format.

First and foremost, all of these written materials communicate messages about the course and its conduct. But beyond this explicit information are other, more subtle messages. They are conveyed not as much by what we say as by how we say it. Without the benefit of tone, facial expressions, and other nonverbal cues, written communication creates new challenges for establishing a positive learning environment.

Several parameters guide our written communication with students. We need to be polite, and most of us are. We need to be professional, and most of us don't have a problem with that either. But we also a need to be personable. There's all sorts of evidence that creating personal connections with students has a positive effect on learning experiences, but how much thought do we give to making those connections in writing?

It was an interesting study of syllabi that got me thinking about this. The researchers created two syllabi. The first contained language they equated with teacher-centered approaches—lots of directives and focus on the course content. The second was more learner-centered and described not just on what students would be learning but also how they would be learning. A cohort of students looked at each syllabus and then answered a series of questions about the course and its instructor. Based on the syllabus alone, these students attributed teacher-centered or learner-centered characteristics to the hypothetical professors they had been told authored each syllabus.

It reminded me of an activity I used in my graduate course on college teaching. I assembled a set of syllabi from courses taught by instructors I knew and had observed teach. After removing all the identifying information, I had small groups review a syllabus and share their impressions of the course and instructor. Each time, their descriptions of both were amazingly accurate.

The syllabi study did not consider how impressions about the course and instructor are mediated when the teacher presents and discusses the syllabus in person. But often the syllabus is now a stand-alone introduction to the course and instructor. That's almost always the case in online courses, but even in face-to-face courses the syllabus is often posted on the course website before the class convenes. So, students start to form their impressions before the first class.

I wonder if we are as aware of the "tonal" messages in our written communications as we should be. Often, we have so many assignments to grade that we get tired and the comments can become cryptic. Students, personally vested in their work, respond viscerally to teacher comments, especially those that point out flaws. Yes, they need to grow up and learn from negative feedback, but growing up is a process. How can we make it a constructive experience?

Connecting with students—being personable in our prose—is a matter of style, which means the options are many and the best choices are ones that fit comfortably with our teaching identities. I'd like to encourage us to explore how we're coming across in our writing. Take a look at the last few emails you sent to students. Read some of the comments on those assignments you're about to return. Review your latest contributions to the ongoing online discussion. Does the writing have a voice and sound like it's written by a real person? Is the tone constructive? Does it convey an unwavering belief in the ability of students to learn? If not, what changes can you make?

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