



*Learning a particular social-media platform isn't enough; students need skills in creating multimedia content, evaluating the metacontext of a platform, and participating in a community for a certain purpose.*

## PRODUCING AND CONSUMING CONTENT:

# Participating in the Online Social Culture

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In considering social media in the classroom, teachers and school librarians are faced with a technical challenge. As 21st-century learners are immersed in social media, they must learn to navigate multiple platforms while maintaining the attitude of inquiry, critical thinking, and discussion—sharing information and, ultimately, acting in the real world. Yet, each new platform appears to require new ways of working. How do we focus student's energy on the content of social media, rather than the particulars of using one platform? Students need effective strategies for dealing with social media. The main strategy is for students to see themselves as both producers and consumers of content.

### **Students as Producers of Content**

#### *Limited Skill Set Required*

We often talk about differences among social-media platforms, but first we need to recognize they all have one thing in common. They all communicate by means of the same types of content: text, audio (voice or music), photos, video, or a combination of media. In the

simplest terms, we have limited choices of how to communicate online: by auditory, visual, or audio-visual means. This limited set of choices is actually good because it means a skill set, such as editing photos, can carry across multiple platforms. This reality also helps us teach better because students need limited skill sets across a limited number of communication methods.

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Likewise, students need to understand when one medium is better than another for communicating a message. It's pointless to write an essay if a photo can communicate the same thing at a glance. Why take the time to create a video, when writing a simple business letter will do the job?

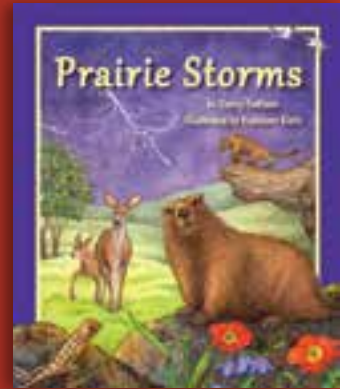
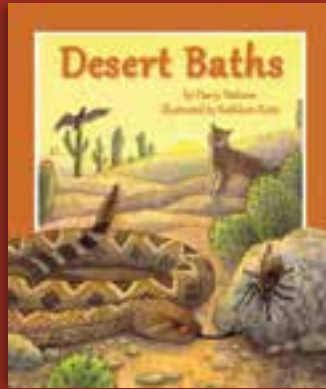
Social-media lessons should help students develop skills in creating each type of content. Remember that just as some children are auditory, visual, or kinesthetic learners, they will have preferences in how they communicate. Past experiences may also give them strengths and weaknesses in one area or another. But effective online communication means flexibility of media.

### *Content + Social-Media Platform*

Producing content for social media comes down to an analysis of the communication goals and the strengths of each social-media delivery platform. Here are some typical questions:

- What is your communication goal? It might be to entertain, inform, or educate.
- What is the best medium for this task? For example, Pinterest specializes in photos; YouTube, in video. Twitter demands short text, only 140 characters long; podcasts let you talk or play music at will; blogs combine photos, video, and text in any proportions.
- When a social-media platform supports various media, what are the strengths of that social platform? Presentation of photos and video is Facebook's strength, but short text can be used effectively, too.

One essential skill is the ability to analyze a social platform. For



*Desert Baths and Prairie Storms are the latest books by Darcy Pattison. You can find out more about her work at <[www.darcypattison.com](http://www.darcypattison.com)>.*

example, Denver math teacher Sara Cougill says, "Facebook is a completely different medium from Pinterest in my online life, serving different purposes. If you want to know what I'm doing, check Facebook. If you want to know what I've been thinking about lately, check my Pins on Pinterest <<http://pinterest.com/saracougill/pins>>" (2012).

Students should also learn that different platforms have different audiences. For example, LinkedIn focuses on making connections for the purpose of business, while Facebook is a better choice for making and maintaining social connections.

Finally, students should learn to study a particular social-media platform. While many students jump in and start playing around, the way a platform really operates may not be obvious. They need to read tutorials, especially the official tutorials, but also the popular tutorials from the geeks who have studied this platform in depth.

For example, for a couple years publicity gurus said that an author of children's books should have a Facebook Fan Page. Recently, Facebook revealed that only about 16 percent of Fans ever see a Facebook Fan Page post because of

an algorithm called Edge Rank. An Edge is any interaction between a person and Fan Page: reading a post, commenting on a post, liking a post, or sharing a post. The type, the frequency, and the recency of your interactions determine whether you'll see a particular post. These statistics question the effectiveness of a Fan Page when it takes so much time to develop a strong Edge Rank. In other words, students' assumptions about a social-media platform may be incorrect, and they need to study it to discover its hidden pitfalls and best practices.

### **Students as Consumers of Content**

Likewise, as consumers of content, students need to evaluate the messages received via social-media platforms. Students need to consider:

- Who is it from?
- What is the purpose of this communication?
- What are they asking me to do?

### *Critical Thinking*

Key to using social media is the ability to stand back and evaluate the credibility of a source of information, apart from the actual content. While developing this

critical attitude toward traditional media is important, the attitude is even more crucial in the context of using social media because information didn't go through the vetting process of formal publication. Can the student corroborate the information from multiple sources? How recent is this information? Are the author's credentials appropriate? In other words, the ability to step back, to become aware of the metatext or metacontext is more important than ever.

### Collaborative Thought and Action

Using social media also allows for collaboration in thinking.

For example, wikis, group blogs, surveys, or even Facebook groups (private or public) are platforms for creating, curating, and disseminating a group's knowledge. Students need to see these collaborative efforts as vehicles for making real-world decisions and solving real-world problems. For example, a wiki about the school's senior prom might prove an interesting assignment in problem solving and encouraging community involvement. Parents could sign up as chaperones; students could suggest bands; teachers could post dress codes; or committees could collaborate on decorations and refreshments.

## Helping Students Pull It All Together

Online learning takes place in the midst of a plethora of communication purposes. Learning a particular social-media platform isn't enough; students need skills in creating multimedia content, evaluating the metacontext of a platform, and participating in a community for a certain purpose. Only then will 21st-century learners be equipped to make informed decisions about their online activities.

### Works Cited

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