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Pre-Service Teacher Social Networking Decisions and Training Needs: A Mixed Methods Study

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The use of social networks in America has risen nearly tenfold in a decade, rising from 7% in 2005 to 65% in 2015. This rise in the use of social networks has presented new ethical, legal, and professional challenges for educators. Teachers are held to higher standards of moral behavior than the general population. This mixed-methods study examined the types of social networks used by pre-service teachers and if they are making good decisions when using social networks. The findings show that the pre-service teachers were unsure what to post. Based on this finding, the researchers provide training suggestions to help pre-service teachers avoid common errors and misconceptions.

Introduction

The use of social networks in America has risen nearly tenfold in a decade, rising from 7% in 2005 to 65% in 2015 (Perrin, 2015). The rise in use of social networks has presented new ethical, legal, and professional challenges for educators (Russo, Squelch, & Varnham, 2010) with numerous reports of teachers dismissed due to posting inappropriate images and text to social networking sites (e.g. Collier, 2012; Jauregui, 2015; Michael & Young, 2015, Rhodan, 2015). As such, researchers such as a Foulger, Ewbank, Kay, Popp, and Carter (2009), Mikulec (2012), Russo, Squelch, and Varnham (2010) call for instruction and guidelines to help future teachers use social networks in a way that does not jeopardize their future career.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study is to examine if pre-service teachers are clear on what is appropriate and inappropriate behavior when participating in online social networks. By identifying the errors and misconceptions made by the pre-service teacher participants, this will uncover training needs that could help pre-service teachers avoid these pitfalls in the future.

The questions guiding this study are:

What errors of judgment do pre-service teachers make when using social networks and what training is needed to avoid those mistakes?

- What social networking sites are pre-service teachers using?
- What are pre-service teachers using social networking for?
- What mistakes or misconceptions do students have in regards to social networking?
- What social network training could support pre-service teachers from posting text and images that could be deemed inappropriate?

Brief Literature Review

Professional Conduct

Teachers are held to higher standards of moral behavior than the general population (Carter, Foulger, & Ewbank, 2008). Pre-service teachers have to consider what will cause them to be a less desirable candidate or an absolute non-hire for potential employers. It does not matter if the pre-service/in-service teachers are behaving lawfully and conducting these behaviors in the own personal time (Turley, 2012). When they are posted in a public forum, they are no longer private behaviors. Teachers should act as role models to show their students how to behave responsibly in the real and virtual world (Villano, 2008).

Training

In a recent study, Mikulec (2012) examined pre-service secondary teachers' awareness of issues of self-disclosure on social networking sites. Mikulec found that the pre-service teachers did not appear to always understand how some materials could be construed as unprofessional until they went through examples of real cases where people had been fired for misconduct. After reviewing these real cases, many of the pre-service teachers went into their social networking sites to delete content with this new understanding. Mikulec (2012) and Foulger et al. (2009) both found that pre-service teachers did not fully consider who would see their social network posts and how others could see these posts. In addition, pre- and in-service teachers wanted a clear code of teacher conduct in a network world.

Methods

Participants

The participants in this study consisted of 121 undergraduate education students at a large mid-Atlantic university. The majority of the students (78%) were between the ages of 19 and 29 years old. The participants were pre-service teachers enrolled in either an online or face-to-face instructional technology course focusing on all subjects and grades in PK-12.

Measure

A ten-item questionnaire was used to find out about the participants social networking behaviors. The questionnaire was presented online to the participants using the Qualtrics questionnaire platform. Items one to five asked the participants to list social networking sites they use, have used in the past, and expect to use in the future. It then asked the participants to describe what they use the sites for. Items six to ten were vignettes that included figures (photographs and images with text) that could be posted to a social network. The pre-service teachers were asked to choose from a four point Likert-type scale if they definitely would post, probably would post, probably would not post, or definitely would not post. Three vignettes were designed as posts that future teachers should not post to social networks, as they included alcohol or inappropriate comments about working for the government. The other two images were innocuous and suitable for posting.

Data Analysis

Participants provided lists of social networks for items one, four, and five of the questionnaire. These lists were aggregated into tables going from most to least. Item two was aggregated numerically into a table to list if the participants used the social networks for professional use, personal, or both. Item three asked the participants to explain what they shared on the social networking websites/tools/apps. Qualitative data from this item were coded using a grounded theory design with a constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin 1998).

Items six through ten were the social networking vignettes part of the questionnaire. Before the data could be analyzed, it was screened and cleaned following methods outlined by Osborne (2012). After data cleaning, the remaining qualitative data from the social networking vignette questions were analyzed using frequency analysis. This step allowed researchers to determine how the majority of participants rated the various social networking

posts. Next, the researchers analyzed if there was a structure present between the social networking vignette questions by performing factor analysis (Cudek, 2000). Principal component analysis (PCA) extraction method was applied to analyze as much variance as possible from a limited amount of variables (Jolliffe, 2002). To better understand the results of the PCA, the oblique promax rotation was then applied (Costello & Osborn, 2005).

Procedure

As the PK-12 instructional technology course was the only class of its nature at the university and the topic of social networking was not covered in prior classes, it was anticipated that the majority of the participants in this class would not have had any recent in-depth discussions about their online social behavior. Before this topic was covered in class, the students were asked if they wanted to participate in this study. The voluntary participants from both the face-to-face class and the online class completed the questionnaire. Although there were no constraints as to the length of time to take the questionnaire, the participants were told to complete the question in one sitting for due to the anonymity the participants could not go back to complete the questionnaire at a later time. The questionnaire was also closed before the topic was covered in class.

Results

When the participants were asked what social networks they used, they responded with a total of 45 different sites. The majority of those sites have only one or two users. The majority of participants used Facebook (88%) the most, then Instagram (62%), Twitter (32%), Snapchat (31%), and Pinterest (28%), the other social networks listed had five or less users. Most participants stated they used social networks predominantly for personal use (62%). Only one person said that they used it just their professional life. Others used it for both personal and professional purposes (37%). When the participants were asked what they currently shared on these social networks, the free text responses were coded into 15 themes. Table 1 presents the codes with brief description.

Table 1
Final Codes of what the Participants Post on Social Networks

	Codes
1	Quotes
2	Photos
3	Updates/status
4	Videos
5	Jokes
6	Thoughts/Opinions
7	Promoting
8	Hobbies
9	Work information
10	Keeping connected
11	Personal Information
12	Share/like
13	Inspirational/religious comments
14	Accomplishments/good news
15	Event information

Note: Share and like was included in these categories as it is another way to post content from others and it is also a public declaration that the participant “like[s]” a comment or image.

In response to what social networks they no longer used, Myspace gained the highest number at 36%, then Facebook (14%) and Twitter (12%). From the list, there were 20 other named social networks that had five or less participants who stopped using that network. When the participants were asked what social networks they would use in the future, the largest number of participants mentioned Facebook (19%), Twitter (14%), Pinterest and Instagram (11%), LinkedIn (7%), and Vine (6%). The rest of the 28 social networks listed had only one or two participants. A total of 11% were not sure what they would be using in the future, and 4% thought it may be the same as what they are using now.

From the social networking vignettes, there were 121 cases collected. After data screening and cleaning, 108 cases were complete and valid for analysis; thirteen cases were removed due to missing data. The Snapchat image was something that could be posted by a pre-service or in-service teacher. Frequency analysis revealed that participants were unsure if they would post the given image in Snapchat with a tie between “Probably Would Not Post” (29%) and “Probably Would Post” (29%). The Instagram image and text was not something that should be posted by a pre-service or in-service teacher. For this image, the majority of participants chose that they “Definitely Would Not Post” (56%). The Pinterest images and text was not something that should be posted by a pre-service or in-service teacher. The majority of participants said they “Probably Would Post” (36%). The Twitter image was something that could be posted by a pre-service or in-service teacher. For this image, the majority of participants said they “Probably Would Post” (32%). The Facebook image and comment was not something that should be posted by a pre-service or in-service teacher. The participants were unsure if they would post the given image and comment with a tie between “Probably Would Not Post” (33%) and “Definitely Would Not Post” (33%).

Discussion

Congruent with recent national statistics (Perrin, 2015), the majority of the participants in this study were active on social networks and the majority used the social networking sites for personal use (62%). It was interesting that there are many media claims that Facebook is losing popularity among teens (e.g. Lang, 2015; McGlynn), yet these data show that this does not appear to be the same for young adults (19-25) in this study. These data show Facebook is the social network of choice with 88% of the pre-service teacher participants being active users of Facebook. Nonetheless, when the participants were asked what social networks they no longer used, 14% did report that they have stopped using this site. These statistics do not fully correlate with 88% active users + 14% stopped use is 102%. This may be due to one or two participants who are thinking of stopping using Facebook, or perhaps feel that they should due to the media reports that Facebook is “meaningless” (Lang, 2015).

Myspace was the social networking site that the majority of students had stopped using. At 36% it is relatively small to say that the reason many had left was due to the website closing and that the site was similar to Facebook in the way that it was organized. The number of participants who had stopped using particular social networks was small and this connects with the relatively new trend towards using social networks. Instagram, Snapchat, and Twitter are often reported as the social network of choice for young adults (Piwek, & Joinson, 2016). Although these data do not follow the move away from Facebook that is reported, these data do appear to confirm that Instagram (62%), Twitter (32%), and Snapchat (31%) do have the largest amount of users after Facebook. Data show that they also have people who are also leaving these networks. An interesting trend appears to show that although Twitter is something that participants have moved towards, there is a large proportion (14%), in relation to the other social networks, of people also moving away from using this Twitter. This may be due to the restriction on the characters the users are allowed to post, or that it is a different layout than the Facebook format that many may be used to.

As the participants were asked to name the social networks they expect to use in the future, the data was a lot lower across the board as some reported (11%) they were not sure and others appeared to not vote which may be because they were unsure and did not chose that option. From the participants who did list social networks, again a clear trend shows Facebook to be the main choice (19%), followed by Twitter (14%), Pinterest and Instagram (11%). A small 3% thought they would be using Snapchat in the future. These data are helpful to pre-service teacher educators to know the types of social networks chosen by pre-service teachers as that prescribes what can be posted (text, images), how much can be posted, how long it may appear for, and also what other options the user has, such as the like and share features.

In explaining how they use social media, the pre-service teachers in this study shared that they posted a great variety of content to these sites. It can be assumed from this that any activity that pre-service teachers engage in or even think about could potentially be posted to their social networks. Many of the participants listed photographs and these are relatively easy to post to social networks as the majority of smart mobile phones offer the option to post to popular social networks direct from where photos are stored on the phone. One English teacher posted a photograph of herself on vacation holding a beer glass and a wine glass. When she returned to her school in Georgia, she was asked if she had pictures on Facebook of herself with alcohol. When she responded that she did, she was given the option to resign or be suspended. The teacher chose to resign (see, *Daily Mail Reporter*, 2011).

There are also many who shared or liked what others have posted. Although it can take a second (or less) to share or like a post, it should be noted that this is all it has taken for teachers to be dismissed. Pre-service teachers may not be aware that sharing and liking is a public agreement and just the same as posting it themselves in the first instance. Students reported sharing personal information, religious comments, jokes, thoughts, and opinions. Many of these innocent posts of things that they can say to others in conversation have to be considered very differently when posting to social networks. A vegan teacher from Ohio was dismissed from a school after he posted about his opposition to dairy farming (Homer, 2014). The concern was that in a largely agricultural area the comment may offend some of the parents. The pre-service teachers in this study may often post comments that could cause them to be dismissed and even lose their teaching license.

In concurrence with Belch (2012), Foulger et al. (2009), and Mikulec (2012), data from the vignette section of the questionnaire show that pre-service teachers were often unsure about what they should and should not post and training is needed. When the majority chose correctly, there were still 1/3 or more that would have posted the inappropriate text or image. When using social networking to post photographs, the majority of pre-service teachers were sure that it was not appropriate to post images that involved alcohol, but were less sure if pictures involving parties or “silly behavior” was or was not appropriate. For example, data from the Snapchat vignette shows a man in a suit photographed doing a cartwheel in a field. The text next with the image says “Wedding Time”. The pre-service teachers were divided on whether this image was appropriate to post. The majority were evenly distributed in the probably would post and probably would not post.

The majority of the participants thought that sharing possibly offensive or controversial comments was not okay when the comments was the main focus of the post. However, when the offending comment was mixed with other innocuous comments, the majority of the participants thought it was okay to post. For example, the Pinterest vignette showed multiple web pages one of which had the comment “Welcome to teaching! Where the salaries are low and everything is your fault”, and there were pre-service teacher participants who thought this was okay to post. From these data, it is imperative that pre-service teachers are provided with training to avoid the possibility that they could post an image or text that could be deemed inappropriate. As electronic footprints are never completely erased, it is imperative that this training is provided as early as possible in the program. Training points to include are:

- Consider all images and text, no matter how small, when it is to be added to a social network.
- What is possibly mentioned as a side comment or joke could be inappropriate when posted to a social network.
- Private networks are never private if they are on the web. Posts can easily be shared with others who are not part of those private networks.
- Newspaper reports about teachers who have been dismissed from their positions due to posting inappropriate text/images in social networks are useful for demonstrating to pre-service teachers how this can actually happen.

Conclusion

In agreement with Belch (2012), Foulger et al. (2009), and Mikulec (2012), this study shows that despite the national trend in using social networks, pre-service teachers are not clear on what behaviors could get them dismissed from a teaching position. Pre-service teachers are often using various social networking tools on a daily basis. Findings from this research show that despite media reports (e.g. Lang, 2015; McGlynn, 2013) that teens are moving away from using Facebook, this trend does not appear to be the case with these young adults. Facebook is the social network used by the majority (88%). Reports that Instagram, Twitter, and Snapchat are on the rise does appear consistent with these findings. It was interesting to find that although many had joined Twitter, the participants also appeared to quickly be moving away from this network, Snapchat also seemed to be losing popularity.

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