

Teaching Students about Their Digital Footprints

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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 we impart to our students?

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