

# What Schools are Really Blocking When They Block Social Media

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The debates about schools and social media are a subject of great public and policy interests. In reality, the debate has been shaped by one key fact: the almost universal decision by school administrators to block social media. Because social media is such a big part of many students social lives, cultural identities, and informal learning networks schools actually find themselves grappling with social media everyday but often from a defensive posture—reacting to student disputes that play out over social media or policing rather than engaging student’s social media behaviors.

Education administrators block social media because they believe it threatens the personal and emotional safety of their students. Or they believe that social media is a distraction that diminishes student engagement and the quality of the learning experience.



Schools also block social media to prevent students from accessing inappropriate content. I have often wondered what are schools really blocking when they block social media. Working in a high school this year has given me added perspective.

In one class my graduate assistant and I are working with a teacher in a Technology Applications class. Our goal is to reinvent the classroom and, more important, the learning that takes place. We structured the learning to be autonomous, self-directed, creative, collaborative, and networked. We decided to let the student teams pick which digital media project they wanted to pursue. Some students elected to team together to produce a series of Public Service Announcements (PSAs) that target teens. These students liked the idea of using digital media to tell compelling stories about the challenges of teen life. Other students

wanted to produce short narratives. They were excited about creating worlds, characters, and narrative dilemmas that allowed their artistic identities to flourish.

In one of our first activities we selected a sample of teen produced PSAs and narrative shorts for the students to study. We asked them to view and critique the different styles, aesthetics, narrative strategies, and technical approaches to digital media storytelling. The teacher posted the links to the videos online and provided the instructions. Suddenly one student raised her hand. She could not access some of the videos. Another student raised her hand. She was having the same problem. At least two of the videos that we asked them to critique were posted to YouTube. The teacher and I had overlooked the fact that YouTube was blocked. A few students used proxy servers to access the videos, a typical workaround in this school. As we struggled to figure out a way to proceed with the learning activity it was clear that we needed to recalibrate the design of the class.

We faced a similar challenge in a game design class that we are working with. Some of the students were intrigued by the prospects of using a Facebook poll to conduct research to build 'user personas' of their peers. We thought that the poll would be useful in teaching them some of the principles of human-centered design and also expand their social media repertoire. But because Facebook is blocked the poll could only be conducted outside of school. This prevented us from working with them in the classroom. It also posed a problem for some of the students who either lacked access to the internet at home or have to share computers with parents and siblings.

We are learning a lot about how young people from this community, which has been hit especially hard by the recession and the growing wealth gap in the United States, are managing their participation in the digital world. The old theories about the digital divide—the access narrative—only explain a small part of what is happening in edge communities.

The real issue, of course, is not social media but learning. Specifically, the fact that our schools are disconnected from young learners and how their learning practices are evolving. The decision to block social media is inconsistent with how students use social media as a powerful node in their learning network. Can social media be a distraction in the classroom? Absolutely. Will some students access questionable content if given the opportunity? Yes. But many students use social media to enhance their learning, expand the reach of the classroom, find the

things that they 'need to know,' and fashion their own personal learning networks. We have met students who have used YouTube to learn how to play a musical instrument—a not so insignificant fact for students whose families can not afford private music lessons. We have seen students use YouTube to help them pursue an interest in building their own gaming computer or share a multi-media project that they developed. Last summer I wrote about students from this same school and how they [created a dynamic learning community to support their interest in creating games](#). Many of them shared YouTube videos with each other in order to learn how to use the game authoring software, GameSalad. (Because it was a summer program, the students and their teacher successfully lobbied to have YouTube unblocked).

A key part of the work that we are doing with students reaches beyond the typical new media competencies such as computer, information, and digital literacy. The teacher believes that network literacy is also crucial. That is, teaching students what [Henry Jenkins](#) explains is, "the ability to effectively tap social networks to disperse ones' own ideas and media products." [Cathy Davidson's](#) students at Duke made a case for network literacy, that is, "using online sources to network, knowledge-outreach, publicize content, collaborate and innovate." A number of these students are creators and makers. They design blogs, websites, games, and graphic art. By blocking social media schools are also blocking the opportunity:

- 1) to teach students about the inventive and powerful ways that communities around the world are using social media
- 2) for students and teachers to experience the educational potential of social media together
- 3) for students to distribute their work with the larger world
- 4) for students to reimagine their creative and civic identities in the age of networked media

In the not so distant future the notion that schools should block social media will become difficult to defend. Before that happens schools will have to reimagine their mission in the lives of young learners, the communities that they serve, and the extraordinary possibilities of networked media and networked literacy.