



Turning an Enemy into an Ally

by Janet Spitler

Adolescence encompasses some of the most difficult years of a person's life. Middle school teachers, therefore, face a daunting task, which today includes acknowledging their students' functioning in the social media world. While "middlers" are excited to join the social networking revolution and might even consider it a rite of passage, the shift in authority from adults to peers can make social media venues dangerous ground. Can educators exercise influence in these venues? Although social media present definite problems, these networking tools also offer unique opportunities for instruction. Mentors of adolescents should embrace these teachable situations in a purposeful way.

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Using social media exposes issues in two distinct areas: content and expression. These range from ignoring standard English conventions to cyberbullying. Students lack the maturity to understand the cost of their decisions and the impact of their words. At their fingertips they have the means to write transparently, but they quickly reveal their naiveté to a sizable audience. While the immediate consequence of cyberbullying is more dangerous than ignoring standard English rules, the attitudes that produce both often originate from two sources: disrespect and apathy. Aware that they have violated grammar rules that second graders learn, they shrug it off, declaring that “it doesn’t matter.” Students mistakenly think that they have the power to change rules by simply ignoring them. They understand too late the missed opportunities caused by this thinking. Potential employers have access to Facebook and Twitter. Teachers can help students understand that poor postings on social networks are public and costly.

It is tempting to simply deny access to the social media until the students are older, as with driving. Yet the minefields of social media give teachers the unique opportunity to help students adjust their thinking regarding two important concepts. Students tend to treat the various forms of electronic communication as informal situations—like notes to friends—even though the audience has the potential of being larger than that of a magazine article. Teachers can help students better understand that writing, like dressing, has formal and informal situations with rules that govern both. Guiding the students to an understanding of which venues require formal responses, including following standard English conventions, and which do not, shows them that there are places and times when rules can be relaxed. Another concept that teachers can emphasize through social media is the future-oriented perspective of time. The cost of being present-minded is clear. Students must be shown future consequences for present words. Navigating the intricacies of social media takes energy, but the opportunities for sharing timeless truths are worth the effort.



Social media are here to stay, with new forums arriving daily. While problems are apparent, these online tools do offer teachers valuable opportunities to reshape young people's perspectives. The methodology within our *Teaching Writing: Structure & Style* will help students learn to respect the grammatical rules, develop vocabulary for critical thought, and mature the decision-making process. It can help schoolteachers turn an enemy into an ally by coaching middlers to make wise choices now that will positively affect their futures.