If you're reading this article, you probably use (or want to use) social media in your work with teens. You know it's the right thing to do: integrating social media into your work develops digital literacy, builds relationships, helps you meet teens where they are, and helps to provide access to information. School library staff who want to use social media with their students often start by talking to a group that can easily kill plans: worried stakeholders. There are some approaches librarians can take when discussing social media in school with stakeholders—like teachers, administrators and parents—that can turn negative conversations into productive and positive experiences.

To find out what approaches others are using I created a short survey with questions about positive discussions on social media in the school environment. I promoted the survey on Twitter, the Massachusetts School Librarians electronic discussion list and solicited librarians whom I know for responses. I found out what current research says about using social media with teens in school. I talked with a high school librarian who created a successful digital literacy curriculum. And, I curated a collection of blogs and websites to find the best current examples of work in this area.

For this article, I define social media as tools like Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, YouTube, Flicker, Shelfari, Goodreads, Pinterest, LibraryThing, Instagram, WordPress, Google+, IM, and e-mail. Stakeholders are administrators, teachers, parents, students—anyone with a vested interest in teens using social media in school.

Surveying School Librarians

In the summer of 2012, fifteen school librarians generously answered six questions about discussing social media with school community stakeholders. As I read the responses, it became clear that fifteen school librarians were describing fifteen unique situations taking place on a continuum. It also became clear that the idea of "using social media" has different meanings in different schools.

At one end of the continuum, the discussion people engage in is about blocking. Do we set the filter to block Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr—even personal e-mail—at school so that students and teachers do not access them for personal use? At the other end of the continuum, we talk about how to use these tools in classrooms—do teachers know how to use the tools? Are they afraid of failure? In the middle of the continuum is conversation about how we use social tools in our practice to promote the library program. This is often where we model digital literacy practices for our school community.

All of the respondents described a recent conversation with stakeholders about using social media. At the "blocking" end of the continuum, one librarian reported adversarial conversations with administrators and that teachers and students feel bullied because they are blocked from using common tools like e-mail at school. But, it was reported that this adversarial relationship produced an unexpected benefit: teachers and students shared the same concerns and operated as a unit to make change in the school and with the school administration.

"No conversation, that's the problem," said one respondent. This librarian in a large district observes that its size precludes a conversation and, as a result, administration uses a top-down approach to decision making. A parochial school librarian explains the Diocese approves use on a case-by-case basis. Each of these schools shares a trait that makes discussion difficult: an administration that makes decisions independently, without input from stakeholders like teachers and students.

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Survey Questions

1. Describe, analyze, or reflect on a recent conversation about social networking tools with stakeholders in your school.
2. What are some common areas of anxiety that need addressing?
3. What kinds of information and approaches elicit positive responses from stakeholders?
4. How do you define success in talking about social media policy with administrators, teachers, and parents?
5. How are you involved with writing acceptable use policies for social media?
6. Which social networking tools have you used in your library?
7. Which social networking tools do you want to use in your library?
8. Anything else you'd like to say?

In the mid-range of the continuum, discussion happens but social media is not implemented, even though there are discussions. Several librarians report talking about maintaining distinctions between teacher professional and personal social media accounts. Another group describes discussions about using social media for professional development. One librarian reported a conversation centering on administrators' anxiety about using Facebook to communicate with students. Another reports that stakeholders are negative about using social media in school, but are eager to introduce a Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) policy. In one school, the administrators are supportive, but the parents are not. In another, the tech department is supportive, but the administrators are not. These schools recognize that social media is a force that must be acknowledged and they engage in conversations to clarify and debate, not necessarily leading to any movement or change, however.

In schools with more fully developed policies and technologies, teachers are free to use social media. In a school like this, one librarian talks to teachers about using it. Another librarian says that while productive conversation happens, "the will [to use social media in the classroom] is there but not the practice." Neither of these librarians report that social media is used extensively in classrooms. Fear of failure and lack of time to learn how to use the tools are the factors that librarians think hold teachers back. Addressing these fears when talking to teachers can help to encourage them to introduce social media to their classrooms.

Defining Successful Conversations

Kendall Bontini of Waltham (MA) High School believes that "success doesn't have to mean that all of the stakeholders agree on one path forward. In fact—that's probably never going to happen. What really matters is that the voices of those who are most affected by these policies are heard and valued. It takes FOREVER for our policies to change in schools—we cannot allow the decisions and actions of a few to dictate policy for years to come." In Bontini's school, "an aggressive filter blocks any website that has to do with games/gaming, alcohol, etc." YouTube, Facebook, MySpace, and personal e-mail are blocked, but not Tumblr, Flickr, and other photo-sharing sites. When blunt filtering excessively and arbitrarily restricts teachers and students, it's time to stand up for your rights.

Schools with nuanced filtering have different definitions of success. One librarian reports that "[a]ny kind of open dialogue" is welcome. Jennifer Dimmick of Newton (MA) South High School says, "[w]e want to be respectful of [administrator's] concerns and not cause rancor. If we plant the seed, then slowly tend to it by directing those opposed towards positive examples, we are confident that it will grow."

Some librarians look for results-based outcomes like "getting teachers to try it," "focus[ing] on how it benefits students," "administrators see[ing] educational merit or usefulness as a PR tool" and "a willingness to try something new."

Robin Cicchetti, Director of Library and Technology Integration at Concord-Carlisle (MA) High School defines success as "the lessening of anxiety. [Stakeholders] are afraid of making the wrong decision... An example from our learning commons is filtering Facebook. Initially, Facebook was filtered because it was considered dangerous, a source of bullying, and inappropriate for school. A discussion about positive ways it was used (organizing sports teams, class events, school clubs, and study groups) with examples gathered from students, the benefits of bringing it into an open space to reinforce the understanding that Facebook is not private, and helping students build self-regulation skills resulted in the filter being removed. I have heard my principal explain this to parents who asked why it wasn't filtered. Everybody relaxed, there was less anxiety, and we succeeded in our goal not to ban social media."

Anxious Stakeholders

If we want to discuss social media with stakeholders, we must understand their fears. Only one librarian mentioned cyberbullying as the dominant stakeholder fear. Distraction from schoolwork was cited most often, followed by "terror," in some cases, of "inappropriate contact between teachers and students." Lack of control is a free-floating anxiety reported by several librarians, including a fear of students [posting] disrespectful information.
Discussion Strategies

Why spend time reading this litany of anxieties? "Recognizing and validating concerns, and not dismissing them out of hand helps build trust and respect," says Cicchetti. Acknowledging that we will lose some control and even fail sometimes is an honest approach. For example, when I introduced Twitter to a class, nobody could sign in to start their accounts. The day after the class, everyone could. The lesson we learned was not to stop using Twitter—but to make account sign-ups a homework assignment before classes meet.

Getting to “Yes”

Most librarians believe that giving commonsense, concrete examples of ways to use social media in the classroom is key. Some of the ways we do this is by giving instructional support, creating rubrics and assessments, and leading workshops. Riskier responses to stakeholder anxieties are guaranteeing success (an impossible promise) and complete monitoring over local area networks (how can we watch every screen every second and teach at the same time?) as well as proving connections to learning.

Citing research is a foolproof way to get serious attention from stakeholders. Unfortunately, right now, research in this area is still in its infancy. Important research exists on social media and teens, but much of it is outside of the education setting. Until the research catches up, anecdotal evidence offers important information. While anecdotes lack the scientific grounding of research, they often inspire educators to challenge themselves and lead to real change in the field. When we give stakeholders evidence of our colleagues’ social media success stories, they often think "if they can do it, why can’t we?" A beautiful facet of this approach is that we often gather these anecdotes from social media (professional learning networks on Twitter, Facebook, Nings, blogs, etc.). Be sure to point this out to stakeholders.

Luckily, as teachers and librarians, we can move social media into the classroom by creating curriculum for it. Jen Thomas, the Librarian at Bishop Stang High School in North Dartmouth (MA), uses social media regularly in her Digi Lit course. Thomas says that the course is "based on the belief that librarians are in the business of giving access to information, not blocking it. Students can make bad decisions about social media, or learn how to use it productively. The best decision I made for this course was to use Tumblr as the medium for delivery and work collection. I needed a blog and asked the class which tool to use. The students help with the design of the course. I model collaboration."

It took Thomas three years to develop the curriculum in collaboration with the English department and a professor from the University of Rhode Island. The curriculum is embedded in a Freshman English course and counts for 10 percent of the final English grade. She encourages librarians to look at her course materials and use it for inspiration for our own courses, http://fc.dfrccc.com/~jthomas@bishopstang.com/. (You can find more resources related to this article on the YALS website, http://yalsa.ala.org/yals.)

Civic Engagement and Acceptable Use Policies (AUPs)

A minority of librarians in my unscientific survey report having input into their schools’ acceptable use policies (the policies that codify technology use in schools). This needs to be rectified, and you can make your voice heard by volunteering to be on the AUP committee. You are an important part of the discussion because you understand the strengths of social media, know how to use it and have built your career on giving access to information.

Consultant and educator Debbie Abilock thinks that schools should integrate civic education into creation of school policies. Following her suggestion, remember the very important stakeholders whose voices need to be heard: the teens with whom we work. When you volunteer to be on your schools’ AUP committee, invite students to sit at the table and join the discussion.

Talking about social media with stakeholders yields enduring rewards. Because we acknowledge and validate stakeholder anxieties, the conversations help build trusting relationships. Civic responsibility grows because the community starts to think about how to build effective acceptable use policies for social media. When locating anecdotal evidence of social media use, librarians create and strengthen their personal learning networks. Finally, as educators, we are pushed to challenge ourselves, accept failures as part of getting to success, and effect real change in our fields. YALS

References

3. Debbie Abilock, "Is Your Ethics Policy a Quick Fix or a Civic Outcome?" KnowledgeQuest 34, no. 4. Library and Information Science Abstracts (LISA).