

**Building a Professional Teaching Identity  
on Social Media**



# **Building a Professional Teaching Identity on Social Media**

*A Digital Constellation of Selves*

**Janine S. Davis**

*University of Mary Washington, USA*



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*Thank you to all who made this book possible. This book is for you.*

*For the Schanks and the Davises.*

*For internet friends both close and far-flung.*

*For people I have never met, not even once.*

*For all the students I have ever taught,  
and who continue to teach me.*

*For my friends, especially Jasmine, Chrissy, and Vicki.*

*For Alex, Ayla, and Lena.*



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MARTHA BURTIS

## FOREWORD

In 2011, Ashley Payne, a high school English teacher in Georgia, was forced to resign after the parent of one of her students discovered a photo on Payne's Facebook wall of her posing with alcoholic beverages. The picture, taken several years earlier while Payne was traveling, is pretty tame by the standards of what many young adults post on social media. Payne's case made national news, and her legal attempts to be reinstated were unsuccessful. Her story is one in a long string of narratives about educators and social media. A quick Google search will turn up dozens, if not hundreds, of anecdotes involving teachers fired for the content of what they shared on various social media accounts.

Faced with these chilling stories, it's difficult to know what to advise a preservice teaching student, ready to embark on a career in education. It is tempting to suggest that one should proceed with extreme caution, perhaps avoiding social media altogether. However, preservice teachers often are also twenty-something young adults, only a few years out of high school, still forming their identities and determining how to best present themselves in face-to-face and online situations. Moreover, social media is woven into the fabric of their lives and has been since many of them were preteens. This combination of identity formation coupled with the availability and ubiquity of social media is an undeniable reality of our particular moment in higher education. Turning a blind eye to this reality is an abdication of our responsibilities as educators. If you're not sure where to begin as you consider the integration of social media into the education curriculum, this book can serve as a guide.

Returning again to the chilling narratives of teachers being fired, it is easy to be shocked by the reported details. Some of the stories, like Payne's, seem to represent an overblown reaction to a relatively minor transgression. Other stories, such as a teacher in Louisiana who was fired after using her Twitter account to share strong criticisms of Common Core State Standards, could be interpreted as a retaliation against a particular political or professional stance. In contrast to these troubling tales, there are also incidents in which (usually young, or early-career) educators are reported to have posted sexually explicit, racially charged, or simply vulgar status updates, photos, or videos. It's easy to have an initial reaction of shock and outrage. However, anyone who has ever followed the social media accounts of college students might view these incidents with a different eye.

M. BURTIS

In my work with students, I frequently find myself following them on Twitter, Facebook, and other social media and networking sites. This is in large part because of the kinds of classes I teach which deal with digital identity, digital storytelling, and online community. Even knowing that I'm watching, my students make use of vulgar and profane language and provide details of their lives that I would generally classify as "over-sharing." I have to remind myself that these students are at a different moment in their lives than I am. They are usually of traditional college age. At my school, they are also most likely away from home in a residential university setting for the first time. They are encountering people, situations, and particular challenges that are different from anything they've experienced before. Social media serves as a performative space in which they are trying out new identities (often with the trappings of new language, customs, and behaviors). They may try out several aspects of identity before their own sense of themselves begins to solidify. While this experimentation occurs, they may say and share things that are out of "the norm" for them. The flip side to this situation is that in a few short years, I know that they will be graduating and taking on other kinds of personae. They will have to begin, to borrow their vernacular, "adulting" soon.

What is our role—what is our responsibility, in fact—to these students when it comes to helping them navigate the world of social media? And, in the world of preservice teachers, where the stakes may seem even higher, how can we prepare students to be successful? Davis' text points us in important and useful directions. In the classroom, we need to promote thoughtful engagement with the tools of social media. Beyond this, we need to help our students to articulate the different aspects of their identities and to reflect upon how they enact and expose those identities in authentic, deliberate ways. Our students are already capable of understanding that they have different audiences in their lives, and that these audiences need to be addressed in different ways. However, they still need the experience, language, and information to make wise choices about the presentation of their own digital identity.

Davis also takes us beyond the (not insignificant) challenge of helping students to hone and more carefully consider their digital identity. She clearly articulates that avoiding the conversation with our students about social media does them a huge disservice by divorcing them from vibrant, vital online communities of educators. For example, from relatively early in its existence, Twitter has served as an online hub for the development of personal learning networks. Davis offers clear advice and strategies for fostering and developing one's own network, using Twitter as an effective catalyst. By turning the conversation about social media away from the reactionary ("How do I avoid getting in trouble?") to the proactive ("How can these spaces and tools make me a better teacher?") she also recasts these issue for us. Social media isn't something we merely have to overcome; it is something we need to master.

The preservice teachers in Davis' book are both students and teachers in training. As students, they have an opportunity to learn and think more deeply about how

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online and digital spaces are changing the culture we live in, and how they, as student teachers will respond to that culture. As teachers in training, they're also arming themselves with the knowledge and expertise to educate the next generation of college students about how to thoughtfully, critically, and humanely engage in digital spaces. After reading this book, I'm hopeful that our future teachers can thoughtfully and critically navigate social media, and, in doing so, they can provide the students they teach with a bright example of what's possible.



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