Letting Social Media Take Flight: Spending Time with Jennifer Casa-Todd

Saskatchewan School Library Association

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I recently had the opportunity to fly in a plane at night, and I was struck by how, once the plane reached a certain altitude, the stars in the blackness above me looked very similar to the lights on the ground below. To my eye, it was quite disorienting - I had difficultly telling where the horizon ended and the sky began. Fortunately, our pilot seemed to have no trouble navigating, and was able to get us safely to our destination. Social media use, for many teachers, is that flight in the darkness, and Jennifer Casa-Todd is a skilled pilot to help us learn to fly to our destination. I found her recent keynote at the MSLA Conference, *Empowering Students to be Digital Leaders,* coupled with her book, *Social LEADia: Moving Students from Digital Citizenship to Digital Leadership*, to be an inspiring lesson on how to let social media take flight in the classroom.

My son recently brought home some science homework on the principles of flight. When my plane was landing in Regina, he was very eager to tell me about the forces that were acting on the plane: a) thrust, which propelled the plane forward, b) drag, which resisted the plane's movement, c) lift, which allowed the plane to get into the air, and d) weight, which worked to keep the plane on the ground (Gibson, 2017, p.3). Reflecting on Jennifer's book and keynote address, I realized that similar forces act upon a teacher trying to introduce social media in the classroom, and our reactions to those forces determine whether the endeavour will take off or stay grounded. Jennifer provides us with strategies and techniques to utilize the forces that help us fly, and minimize those forces that keep us grounded. So, if you will indulge my flight analogy a little longer, let's look at the forces that help and hinder teachers as we journey to provide digital leadership to our students.

Weight

Weight is that force which keeps you on the ground – it pulls you down and prevents you from ever taking off. What prevents us from even trying social media in our

classrooms? Casa-Todd suggests several pre-conceived assumptions act as forces of gravity when it comes to exploring social media:

1. "Social media is bad" (pg. 2) Casa-Todd (2017) notes that this idea is biased – social media itself is neither good nor bad, rather it is user driven. It can be extremely positive or extremely negative, but this is dependent on the user of the tool, not the tool itself (pg. 2-3). Assuming that social media is bad is a weight that keeps us from flying. At the end of each chapter of her book, Jennifer shares a story of a student who is using social media in a positive manner to make a difference in the world.

2. "Social media is a distraction not necessary for a student's future" (pg. 5). In the introduction of her book, Casa-Todd shares the story that changed her perspective on the necessity of social media, when her teenage daughter, during a job interview, was asked, "What social media networks are you on, and what will I learn about you if I go there?" (pg. xiii). Social media is an integral part of our modern society, and students who do not learn proper social media use can be at a disadvantage in the job market, when submitting university applications, and in other important opportunities.

3. "Not everyone has digital access or uses social media and not all parents are comfortable" (pg. 6). Casa-Todd points out that while this statement is true, it need not be a barrier to providing students with social media opportunities. The examples that she shares confront the problem of digital access because they centre around the use of class social media accounts that allow every student to participate. Jennifer also points out that many parents may not fully understand the potential of social media, and that inviting parents to be a part of the process may empower them to work with their children and become mentors who can provide guidance in acceptable practice (pg. 7).

4. "Digital citizenship programs are sufficient to ensure our students are behaving ethically online" (pg. 3). While Casa-Todd is quick to point out that digital citizenship programs have merit, she also notes that many of these programs focus almost exclusively around Internet safety (pg. 19). Her concern is that this approach teaches students only the negative side of social media, without the opportunity to explore the positive benefits of social media. By providing students with positive social media experiences, students learn about the potential that this medium provides by connecting with people beyond the classroom. If the negative side of social media begins to show itself, the classroom provides an opportunity to address these

problems in context as they occur, and allows teachers, parents, and even other students, to model appropriate online behaviours (pg. 19-21). Jennifer discusses this in great depth in chapter 7 of her book, titled *Digital Citizenship in Context*.

These statements act as weights that keep us from ever attempting to pursue social media. Getting beyond these common assumptions is the first step to getting our social media plane off the ground.

Lift

Lift is the force that allows the plane to stay in the air. If the force of lift is stronger than the force of weight, the airplane rises off the ground and stays airborne (Gibson, 2017, p.3). What forces counteract weight and provide support in our journey as we try social media in our classrooms? Casa-Todd provides some insights into where we can get the lift to help us fly:

PHOTO BY BELINDA FEWINGS on UNSPLASH

1. Provide an audience to your students beyond yourself. Casa-Todd shares the story of her first social media experience, Blogger; her students surprised her by how much they wrote and how much feedback they gave each other before she ever opened the blog to the world (pg. 71-72). Authentic audiences motivate students, and teaching is always a happier experience with motivated students.

2. Surround yourself with a supportive flight crew. Although Casa-Todd does not specifically elaborate on this in her book, it was clear from the anecdotes in her presentation that she surrounds herself with supportive people who encourage her social media use and support her when things get difficult. One particularly memorable story involved an online panel discussion that went awry when a user began posting inappropriate and hateful comments. Although this experience unnerved the panelists, they worked together and supported each other through the negative, and were able to salvage the discussion (pg. 198-199). Surround yourself with a support team that can assist and support you. Connect with people online who share the same

vision. Find people within your school or division who share your goal, and locate people with technical expertise and social media knowledge should you require assistance. These people can give you a boost when you are feeling low.

3. Begin at your comfort level. Social media is just one of several tools available to an educator, and it's perfectly acceptable to start slowly and build confidence. Decide on your purpose, choose an appropriate tool, and try to understand how the tool works. Consult with an education partner to help you get started – a teacher-librarian, a consultant, an administrator, or a social-media connected colleague can all be partners that help you build the confidence to take the plane off the ground. Alternatively, stay in the flight simulator and keep your settings on "private" until you feel comfortable with the tool.

4. Make a plan for when things go wrong. A commercial jet never takes off without reviewing its emergency procedures with the passengers. Casa-Todd points out that we have fire drills, lockdown practice, and other plans in place to teach students how to react in the event of an actual emergency (pg. 201). She also notes that when students are rude to each other in school settings, teachers give them strategies to help them work together (pg. 190). Likewise, it makes sense to have a plan and strategies in place for when we encounter rudeness or other inappropriate activities on social media. This plan keeps you flying when storms and turbulence start affecting your social media plane.

Social media lift is all about building support and confidence – generate enough lift and you can make your project take flight. Find those supports in your own practice, and you will soon be flying.

Drag

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When a plan is trying to move forward, drag is the force that pushes back and provides resistance. There are plenty of events that act as drag on our social media plane, but again Casa-Todd provides some suggestions to minimize those forces that act against student learning when engaging in social media.

1. Stay calm. No one is reassured when the pilot panics. Like any teaching situation, there will be days when something on social media goes wrong. When those days come, it is important to your students that you remain calm and try to think things through logically. Casa-Todd provides a Think-Aloud process that can assist a teacher in addressing a social media situation with their class, while also explaining to the class how and why the teacher is addressing the situation (pg. 202-203).

2. Do not engage. Casa-Todd says this best, "Trying to reason with someone who is belligerent is futile...It is important to continue as if nothing is happening and not engage in any way" (pg. 203). She suggests that if you must interact, asking questions is always better than making statements.

3. Teach the students strategies when they encounter bad behavior on social media. Teaching students at a young age to take screenshots of online behaviour that makes them uncomfortable gives them a tool to help them respond. Likewise, teaching students that it is acceptable, even necessary, to block, mute, and report inappropriate online behaviour empowers students with confidence to use social media effectively (pg. 196-197).

4. Use these experiences as an opportunity to teach empathy. Casa-Todd reminds us, "…behind the negative comment could be someone who's hurting or lashing out. Knowing this doesn't make the situation go away, but it does help provide a perspective of empathy, something we absolutely need to teach our students" (pg. 205).

5. Be clear and upfront with parents. When there is an incident on social media in the classroom, inform parents about the incident, steps taken by the school to address the problem, and encourage parents to address the situation at home. It is important to reassure parents that the teacher and the school administration are responding to any emergent situations diligently and thoughtfully (p.205).

6. Be positive. Jennifer references a quote by George Couros: "We need to make the positive so loud that the negative becomes almost impossible to hear" (p. 204). Keeping your own interactions positive, and teaching your students to do the same, will go a long way to reducing the drag on your social media flight. Teach your students how to handle the negative in a classroom setting, and empower them to deal with these negative situations in their own private social media use.

Unfortunately, there will always be negative voices on social media. By not amplifying those voices, but working to create a positive atmosphere for our students, we can minimize the drag on our plane and proceed smoothly to our destination.

Thrust

Thrust is the force that moves a plane forward. In our social media context, these are the experiences that inspire and motivate us to continue. Casa-Todd provides a number of ways to build thrust for our social media flight:

PHOTO BY TIM MOSSHOLDER ON UNSPLASH

1. Make meaningful connections with others. Social media allows us to connect with other people around the world with an ease never before possible. Students can be inspired when they have a chance to meet other students and learn from them. In chapter 5, *Connecting Students with Meaningful Projects and People*, Casa-Todd shares many stories of projects that led students to make deep connections with students from other parts of the world, and provided meaningful experiences for everyone involved.

2. Find ways to make someone else's world a bit better. While it's true that not everyone needs to change the world, Casa-Todd challenges us to "change one person's world at a time" (p. 9) by sharing our actions and gifts with others. Again, her book and presentation have many uplifting examples of this idea. One memorable moment for me was a Kindergarten class that created posters and a short video on kindness, which they posted with the question, "How did this make you feel?" (p. 246). The Kindergarten students loved watching the responses coming in, as they spread their message of kindness with the world. They could see the effect of their message in the wider community, and it inspired them to be kinder to each other.

3. Promote an important cause. Social media allows students to amplify their voices and bring light to causes that are important to them. This is an area where the technology can allow teachers and students to extend their reach, and learn to become advocates for both themselves and others (p. 251). Jennifer points out the need to teach students the difference between

activism, true action on behalf of a cause, and slacktivism, which is a token display of support with no meaningful action undertaken (p. 254).

4. Ignite students' passions. Casa-Todd devotes all of chapter 11 discussing methods of igniting students' passions through social media. This can be through project-based or inquiry learning, STEM connections, Genius Hour, pop culture ties in, gaming, and many other methods. Jennifer provides examples of how to use social media to tie in these interests and motivate students.

By tapping into some of these ideas, you can create the thrust needed to move your social media plane to new and exciting locations.

Time to Fly

It is true that social media does carry some risks. However, the same is true of flight. Yet flight allows us to go places with a speed and ease hardly imaginable prior to its invention. This would be impossible if the early aviators had been too scared to take risks. We are the early aviators of social media, and if we are willing to face the risks mentioned above, perhaps we too can take our students to places once thought impossible and teach our students to fly!

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