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Susan Schultz

St. John Fisher College, sschultz@sjfc.edu

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Social Media as a Communication Tool for Individuals with Disabilities Living in Rural Settings

Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, here is the paper's first paragraph:

Along with the explosion of social networking comes the fear and promise of what these tools might mean for people who struggle with social interaction and communication difficulties. Living in a rural area can add further complexity for social engagement, as the chances for social interaction outside of the school day can be limited for some students due to the nature of their disabilities and the environments in which they live. The author argues that although online social networking has limitations, with supervision, social media holds potential for developing the opportunities for social interaction for individuals with disabilities.

Disciplines

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Comments

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Susan M. Schultz
St. John Fisher College
Rochester, New York 14618
sschultz@sjfc.edu

SOCIAL MEDIA AS A COMMUNICATION TOOL FOR INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES LIVING IN RURAL SETTINGS

Along with the explosion of social networking comes the fear and promise of what these tools might mean for people who struggle with social interaction and communication difficulties. Living in a rural area can add further complexity for social engagement, as the chances for social interaction outside of the school day can be limited for some students due to the nature of their disabilities and the environments in which they live. The author argues that although online social networking has limitations, with supervision, social media holds potential for developing the opportunities for social interaction for individuals with disabilities.

The social difficulties of students with disabilities are well documented, as many do not possess the natural ability to interact with other adolescents (Blancher & Howell, 2008). Critical social skill and/ or communication deficits can impede social interaction for an individual with a disability. There are a host of social difficulties and differences in communication that can occur, acting as barriers to developing productive communicative and social experiences.

Struggles with pragmatic skills such as deciphering non-verbal communication, maintaining eye contact, and not perceiving the need of another's personal space can make for awkward interactions with others. Lack of understanding or the inability to execute social conventional rules such as demonstrating interest in the speaker, reciprocity in conversation, topic maintenance, and appropriately terminating a conversation are problematic as each is required to create a successful conversational event. Being unable to engage with others by initiating conversation or to read the social cues of a speaker or listener also decreases the opportunity to establish meaningful social interactions. The inability to join into a conversation in 'real time' can cause the individual to appear off topic (Kuder, 2008).

Difficulty in understanding the perspective or intention of others, and the inability to distinguish sincere interactions from those meant to hurt, use, or mock can cause lifelong communication and interaction struggles. All, or any of these communication differences can lead to awkward, uncomfortable interactions because “inability to relate easily to peers can be stressful and stigmatizing for these children, especially in their adolescent years when there is such an emphasis on having friends and fitting in” (Pollack and Russo, 2009, p. 91).

Additionally, some individuals with disabilities, particularly those on the autism spectrum, have difficulty with sensory input, which interferes with their ability to engage with others (Elder, Caterino, Chao, Shacknai, and De Simone, 2006; Ruble and Akshoomooff, 2010). These social skill deficits frequently result in the individual's ability to establish “meaningful social relationships” causing him or her to become socially isolated (Bellini, Peters, Benner, & Hopf, 2007, p. 153).

Living in a rural area can add further complexity for social engagement, as the chances for social interaction outside of the school day can be limited for some students due to the nature of their disabilities. The logistics of transportation can be problematic and the scarcity of local social events can limit opportunities to engage with same aged peers. In a case study conducted by Schultz, Jacobs and Schultz, (2013), Jacob, a young man diagnosed with high functioning autism, was unable to engage in after school activities because he did not live within walking distance of the school, and he did not live on a bus route. Taxi service was limited, and when available, costly and unreliable. Although Jacob had a desire to increase his social connections with others, he was limited by his disability as well as the area he resided in.

However, with the explosion of social media tools that have been developed over the last decade, there is promise for individuals who struggle with social interactions and communication difficulties, as well as those who are affected by distance, to make on-line connections with their peers. "What started out as a tool for college students to stay in touch with friends has grown into a worldwide phenomenon that includes people of a wide range of backgrounds and ages" that holds promise for individuals who live at the social margins (Schultz, Jacobs and Schultz, 2013).

The promise of social media as a communication tool is significant. Those living in rural environments would not have to travel to a fixed place and time in order to socially interact with others. There are considerable benefits to using a digital environment to alleviate many of the social and communication difficulties discussed earlier. In an digital environment, pragmatic difficulties such as eye contact that might make an individual with a disability uncomfortable, or problems with invading another's personal space are 'virtually' eliminated. Social awkwardness no longer becomes a factor. Sensory overload, and having to process conversation in 'real time' also decreases. Lags in conversational turn taking are acceptable on social media sites. Spelling errors are common among the general users of social media while posting. Randomness is appreciated, and can often work to the advantage of the person with a disability. Consider this post by Jacob, who asks one his random wonderings, "*I had an interesting thought over the holidays and that was why do they call both red cabbage and red onions red when they actually are purple?*" (Schultz, Jacobs, and Schultz, 2013, p. 17). This random post started a conversational thread about other oddities. However, if asked in a group of non-disabled peers, this wondering would probably have been looked upon as quite a peculiar question.

Another advantage of social media is the propensity of individuals to use gaming features. On-line games with 'friending' features often reward participants for having more neighbors. Through the 'neighbor' feature in games, it is possible to build a network of friends by inviting and being invited by others to become a neighbor, or to join new games. This feature of the game allows the individual with a disability to become an active part of a social gaming network, rather than being an onlooker or outsider. Additionally, many of these games include chat features where individuals can send messages to each other through the game site. In Jacob's case, posting and chatting in games overflowed to posting within Facebook, participating in real time messaging and using the 'chat' feature in Facebook. More remarkably, after first strengthening on-line relationships, generalization of conversing extended to face to face interactions (Schultz, Jacobs, and Schultz, 2013).

On-line affinity groups that allow individuals with unique interests to converse with like minded individuals are another benefit. Some individuals with social and communication disorders and differences may hold inappropriate or eccentric, long-winded conversations about their favorite topics (e.g. trains, dinosaurs, glass bottles), with little regard for another person's interest. Farmer, Leung, Weiss, Irvin, Meece, and Hutchins (2011) maintain research indicates that adolescents tend to find peers who share the same interests and characteristics that they do, when embedding themselves in a peer group. Young adults who grew up with the same small cohort of peers can have difficulty finding peers to interact with that have similar unique interests. Joining affinity groups can assist people with unusual or obscure interests to feel socially connected to a group, and not as different as they are sometimes made out to be (Gee, 2003).

Farmer, et al. (2011) also reported that rural high school students with disabilities "were socially marginalized, and affiliated with peers that may contribute to the development and maintenance of school adjustment problems" further asserting students with disabilities who attend small rural schools are more likely to be "isolated or peripheral" within the structures of school social groups (p. 32). Such students may engage in risky or problem behaviors, to increase their visibility, and chances of being accepted by a social group (p. 33). Gristy (2012), who studied social and emotional development of students in rural schools, noted the benefits of building social capital, stating adolescents have a need for social interaction, and when it is not acknowledged, can lead not only to loneliness, but difficulties within teaching and learning. Gristy also cites a relationship between a lack of social acceptance, and attendance, poor behavior and/or exclusion in school. Therefore, she states, building opportunities for social interaction are essential for academic success.

Increased interaction through social media venues may help to strengthen social ties to other individuals and ease social anxiety. Posting on sites such as Facebook or My Space can allow for a greater network of individuals to connect with socially, and has potential for creating a reciprocal relationships and even friendships, albeit on-line. Social networking can allow students with disabilities to take ownership of social situations, by complimenting, not replace face to face interactions (Schultz, Jacobs, and Schultz, 2013).

However, there can be concerns regarding whom individuals with disabilities are interacting with. Concerns involves predation. The U.S. House of Representatives passed the "Deleting Online Predators Act" in July 2006, "which requires schools and libraries to protect minors by creating barriers to online sites that require a profile or allow communication with other users" (Schultz, Jacobs, and Schultz, 2013, pp. 22-23). If passed into law, this act would provide protection to schools and libraries against predators, however, would not protect the individual in other environments. Consequently, Schultz et al. (2013) assert ongoing discussions about on-line safety are a must and monitoring of social interactions is highly recommended. Parents, teachers and other caregivers should monitor how private information is posted on social media sites and how privacy options are set (p. 23). Social visibility in on-line environments can also be controlled through adult supervision.

Social networking appears to hold promise for adolescent individuals with disabilities as a venue for increasing social interaction with others, "in what has become a conventional method of communication" (Schultz, Jacobs, and Schultz, 2013, p. 23). The hope is that through the use of *monitored* social media, adolescents with disabilities living in rural areas, that remain on the fringe of social interaction, may be able to strengthen connections and become more comfortable interacting with peers.

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