Social Media Armor: Are You Really What You Post?

Rosalind’s Classroom Conversations, February 2018

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With my team at Cultures of Dignity, I am constantly working to improve our lesson plans for young people. Of course, some issues that young people face are universal like friendship breakups, rejection and jealousy. However, as social media increasingly integrates into young people’s social lives and influences their identity development, we have to regularly revise our tools to help them understand how they are processing these dynamics.
Recently we had an idea: In our *Owning Up* curriculum, we ask students to do an armor exercise to reflect on what they show to the outside world vs. what they're privately feeling and thinking. It is a great way for students to realize why there may be a difference between the two and how that difference may show up in their interactions with others. This difference, between the “public” and “private” you, is one of the fundamental issues for young people and their social media use. We have modified the exercise and are sharing it here.

**Activity: How do we build our social media armor?**

The purpose of the activity is to process and put into words how students “choose” to present themselves in public and online.

Everyone who uses social media develops a social media personality. This personality is both a reflection of how you want others to see you and also how others see you based on your social media activity. And everyone has their own personal armor that they show online through social media. Understanding why you choose the images and information you post is critical to self-awareness.

Here’s how the activity works.

First, have students look through their recent posts on Instagram, Finstas (fake, private Instagram accounts), Snapchat Facebook, Twitter (or any apps they use) with a critical eye. The goal is to get a sense of what they have been showing the world about themselves and why.

Here are questions they can consider as they look through their posts:

- What type of pictures are you posting?
- What language, emojis and hashtags are you using?
- How are you posing? Who are you taking pictures of? What are you taking pictures of?
- What type of articles, videos and posts are you sharing?
What type of filters and edits are you using?

What type of posts do you respond to and how do you respond?

If you are posting with other people, what is your relationship to them?

Is your communication over social media similar to how you communicate in person?

**What type of “you” are you curating?**

Next, have the students think about what they just learned through the self-reflection and write words and/or draw pictures to describe or represent what they share on social media. Have them reflect on this question: What does your social media personality show to the world?

Then, on the other side of the paper, have them identify in words or images what they don’t show people. Have them reflect on these questions: What do you choose to keep to yourself? Who are you behind the screen?

Examples of their responses to both might include:

- I post pictures only with friends or on vacation which shows that I am social and happy.
- I post selfies that may show me as confident and feeling attractive, happy and good about myself.
- I don’t post about negative feelings like when I’m sad, angry or lonely.
- I don’t share pictures of me doing some of the things I like to do because I don’t want people to make fun of them.

Next, have students take out a piece a paper and answer the following questions—they should include the numbers that correlate to their responses:

1. Have you ever posted something about yourself that is completely false? What was it and why did you post it? How did you feel after posting it?
2. Have you ever significantly altered your image or post? What did you do and why?

3. Have you ever tried to communicate complex, deep or real feelings online? What happened?

Examples might include: using a photoshop app to edit body shape, whitening teeth or posting a photo from a terrible night and saying you had a great time.

Explain to students that they will be passing around their sheets anonymously and then students will read aloud responses that were written by other students. Be sure to remind the students of the confidentiality agreement you have made before any session like this: what is said in the room stays in the room and do not provide identifying information. If you are concerned that sufficient trust hasn’t been built in the group, you can ask only students who want to share voluntarily. Remind students that they always have a right to pass.

To debrief this activity, use some or all of the following discussion questions and/or writing prompts:

- What is the difference between being “fake” and trying something on as a new way to present yourself to the world?

- What are the positives and negatives of the particular armor you wear online, and why do you choose it?

- How do you feel about your armor?

- Do you ever wish you could take it off or replace it? If so, how?

- What would happen if you showed aspects of yourself you usually keep hidden?

- How does communication on social media make it easier to say things that you wouldn't normally?

Here are some takeaways and key points to make if the students don't raise them on their own:
- Everybody develops a social media personality.

- It is common to curate an image that reflects what you want people to think about you rather than an accurate depiction of who you are.

- There can be important reasons for why people hide parts of themselves on social media because they might not feel safe sharing all aspects of who they are.

- The difference between your social media personality and who you really are can make it harder to feel good about yourself just as you are.

- Your comments and messages can define your social media personality as well.

By addressing social media like we are here, we aren’t lecturing young people about all the bad things we think they're doing online. We aren’t telling them that their posts are superficial. We’re actually saying the opposite and in a way that encourages the development of their critical thinking and self-awareness in an area of their lives that many of them care deeply about.

Providing young people with the skills to stop and think in the moment about what they’re doing on social media that may be demeaning to themselves or others begins by teaching them how to recognize their motivations and enable self-reflection. Remember, what they choose to present on social media is critical to understanding how they are absorbing cultural messages and then processing those messages as they develop their self-identity and beliefs about their role in their community.