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Networking and Learning in a Virtual World

by Stacy Benge

About five years ago, in an effort to grow my early childhood business and network with others, I created profiles and accounts on various social media outlets. Although there were many platforms to choose from, I decided to concentrate on Facebook, Twitter, and then Instagram a few years later. My goal was to find opportunities to share and gather information in the early years community, as well as market myself as a presenter. Fortunately, social media opened many professional doors, which cultivated relationships and knowledge that greatly exceeded my expectations.

Beginning the Journey

Stepping into social media overwhelmed me at first. On all of the outlets, I started out by following professional organizations including NAEYC and its state and local chapters. I also connected with other trainers and consultants I knew professionally. When reading articles, journals, or publications, I searched for the authors and followed them if they had profiles. I then took notice of who those people were interacting with, and I started to follow those accounts as well. I learned quickly not to follow everybody, as part of your online persona is to have more followers than you are following. If an account is stagnant and has not been active for over a year, it is probably not worth following.

I found that each media outlet reached a different demographic. Most of my audience on Facebook tended to

be parents and families with young children. On Twitter, I interacted and participated in chats with other early childhood professionals. Instagram became my hub for networking and connecting with colleagues overseas. Although each of these platforms serve a different purpose, they are all mutually beneficial for me today.

Interactions, Hashtags and Chats

I discovered that just following accounts was not enough to build an online network. I began to interact with my connections by liking their posts, replying and sharing them to my own page or story. Not only that, I created posts of my own with either a thought, quote or picture I found interesting and beneficial. All the while, I started paying attention to others using hashtags, i.e. #EYLibrary. Hashtags serve as keywords



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or descriptions and help other social media users find posts in certain category or interest area. I took notice of popular hashtags used by other profiles and started using them. Once I did, I found my posts reached significantly more people. Hashtags are a social media must and I rarely post without them now.

Over time, I became aware of people discussing various Twitter chats. One particular group I followed kept inviting early childhood professionals to join the ECE Chat on Tuesday evenings. One night, not quite brave enough to participate, I watched the chat unfold. The moderator of the chat creates a list of about five questions pertaining to a particular topic. The moderator then posts the questions using the chat's designated hashtag (#ECEChat) and participants reply with their answers using the same hashtag. Clicking on that hashtag filters all of the posts in the chat's conversation. After watching an entire chat, and I admit Googling about it too, I finally decided to be brave enough one night to jump in and participate. I spent the next hour connecting, conversing, and learning with other professionals across the state and nation about the given topic. The chat

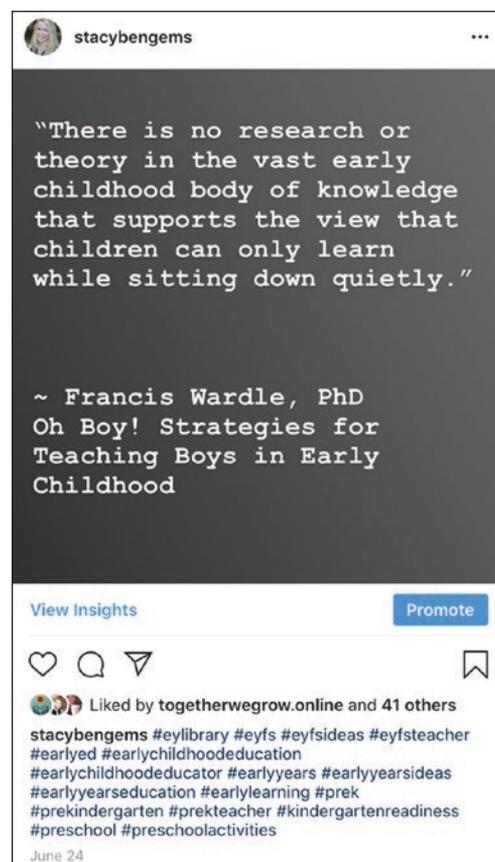
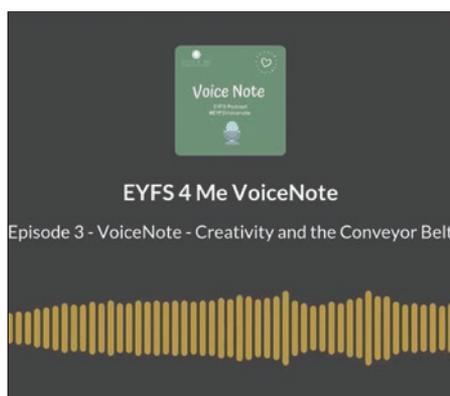
energized me so much that I made it and other chats part of my weekly routine. The professional networks I have formed through Twitter chats have resulted in several invitations for me to present for various organizations. Before a recent presentation, the person introducing me announced, "I met Stacy through a Twitter Chat."

"Going Overseas"

This year, determined to take more risks in my career, I decided to be more assertive in my social media interactions and intentionally connect with new accounts. I noticed a Twitter chat being advertised called EY Share, originating in Scotland. What better way to step outside of my comfort zone than to participate in a chat with people who live outside of the country? From the moment I mentioned I was from Texas, I received the warmest recep-

tion and then requests to return to the chat the following weeks. For about a month, I consistently participated in this chat and thoroughly enjoyed conversing with like-minded professionals from across the pond. The moderator, who was returning to work after maternity leave, asked for some volunteers to guest host the chat. I admit I was nervous, but I volunteered and found myself moderating the chat about a month later. It was thrilling and I beamed from the responses and encouragement I received from my new colleagues overseas.

During the EY Share chats, I found myself communicating frequently with Kerry Payne, a fellow early childhood professional in England. One day, she tweeted her Instagram account and asked anybody who was on that platform to connect with her. I actually had just created my own Instagram account, so I hopped over and gave



her a follow. I then started making various connections on Instagram and found myself mainly interacting with early childhood professionals from the United Kingdom. I started posting stories on my Instagram account including book reviews and recommendations, all the while using hashtags, as I had done on other social media outlets. I began to form professional relationships that resulted in opportunities I never envisioned. In the past several months, I have appeared on a live early years Instagram show, presented for an online early childhood conference sponsored by Hygge in the Early Years, and been a guest on the podcast EYFS 4 Me VoiceNote, all based in the United Kingdom. Could an invitation to present in-person be in the works? One can only hope!

Writing for Exchange

One of the connections I made on Instagram included Exchange Press. Several interactions between us led to a conversation asking if I had an interest in writing an article. Of course I said yes, but I was not sure of what the topic should be. I had to laugh when the suggestion was made to write about my professional development experiences with educators from all over the world via social media. I had not considered myself an expert, but through trial and error, I have built an online presence and have had some amazing opportunities because of it. I can confidently say my career would not be where it is today without the networking power of social media.

Quick Steps for Getting Started

The first step in social media networking is to select the platforms you feel comfortable using and create profiles on them. Almost every outlet



10 Twitter Accounts to Follow

 AnjiPlay @anjiplay	 Kerry Payne @Eyfs4M
 Exchange Press @ExchangePress	 Lisa Griffen-Murphy @OoeyGooleyLady
 Fairy Dust Teaching @SallyHaughey	 NAEYC @NAEYC
 Hearts at Play @HeartsatPlay	 Rae Pica @raepical
 Janet Lansbury @janetlansbury	 Stacy Bengel @StacyBenge

allows you to control the privacy settings on your account; however, if you want to interact with others, it is beneficial to have a public profile. From there, start following other accounts and interacting with them by liking, replying to, and sharing their posts. In fact, feel free to connect with me on Facebook (Stacy Bengel, M.S.), Instagram (@StacyBengeMS), and Twitter (@StacyBenge). Begin to create original posts of your own, sharing information and resources. Be sure to use the hashtags. It can be hit or miss at times, but what matters most is being responsive and consistent in your presence and communications. In no time, you will have created a virtual network and accessed amazing resources and information.

10 Hashtags to Follow

#ChildDevelopment

#ECE

#ECEChat

#EarlyChildhood

#EarlyYears

#EYLibrary

#ExchangeMagazineECE

#EYShare

#Prek

#Preschool