


Face facts



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CHRIS EDWARDS IS AN ENGLISH TEACHER AND ASSISTANT HEAD AT BISHOP DAVID BROWN SCHOOL, SURREY.

Setting up a social networking page for his English GCSE group may have been seen as frivolous by colleagues, but no one could argue with the results, explains Chris Edwards...

Working in an environment where many professionals still hold reservations as to whether the internet will ever catch on, I wasn't surprised by the facial expressions in the staff room when I announced that I had been using Facebook to engage my GCSE English group. These were from the sort of people who advised me when I started teaching that I should "never smile before Christmas", firmly believing that showing any sort of human emotion is a weakness, bound to be exploited by the roustabouts from whom they themselves have suffered abuse since day one. Ironically, mainly because they never smile.

The thing is, as crazy as it may sound; students are, in essence, *a bit like us*. Only younger. Remembering how I was at school, the teachers I wanted to work hard for were those who showed a bit of personality, even if it involved them commenting on how dangerously obese I was, or asking me whether my mother claimed benefits because I was born quite so terminally ginger. Funnily enough, teachers who chose to avoid smiling in favour of carrying a look commonly found on the faces of abattoir workers or off-duty clowns didn't really bring out the best in me.

Page-turner

Facebook wasn't around when I was at school, but if it had been, I'd have been as addicted to it as the boys in my English group are. Even to the stage where I may have happily and unwittingly enhanced my learning by joining a page that encouraged me to discuss literature. To my delight, and probably to the despair of those who doubted my motives, setting up a Facebook page for my all-male English GCSE group was the single most effective intervention I have ever used. The results speak for themselves: of the 32 students who joined the group, 31 achieved or exceeded their target grades. Every student achieved a C or above, despite the fact that each and every one of them was on either the SEN or EAL register, and perhaps most tellingly, five of these boys achieved their only C grade in English.

Obviously, dipping into the world of social networking brings its own risks. If you believe everything you read in the media, you'd think that by doing so I had effectively filled in my own P45 and imprinted my name onto every imaginable register for unimaginably unprofessional activity. However, being in a profession where the biggest risks tend to bring the greatest rewards, I thought I'd go for it. Knowing how Facebook operates, I was careful to ensure that students would not have access to my own personal profile, but instead set up an independent page to operate, initially at least, as a forum for discussion of the GCSE syllabus.

The write stuff

What it turned into was beyond what I had ever imagined. It's difficult to put these students into context, but rest assured that very few of them would ever normally discuss war poetry or J. B. Priestley's moral messages inside the classroom, let alone outside it. To the immense disappointment of those naysayers who were against this concept, these boys seemed as happy to post introductions to essay responses, as they were to 'poke' Megan Fox or profess their hatred for the poor old battered billionaire, Justin Bieber.

The point was, I had infiltrated their psyche. It became normal for them to go on the English GCSE page at any time of the day to read the work of their peers and give their honest opinion on how it could be improved. In fact, the closest thing I encountered to a 'trolling' incident was a disagreement about whether a particular exam response deserved a high C or a low B.

Let's be honest; Facebook can be a minefield for us teachers, but like anything, if used in the right way, it can reap unbelievable rewards and is worth embracing. Preferably with a smile...