

Social Networking: The Unharnessed Educational Tool

Jayne Waddington

University of Colorado at Colorado Springs

In today's digital world teens are increasingly incorporating social networking into all aspects of their lives. This paper explores the topic of teen social networking and how the incorporation of social networking within the classroom can provide a valuable education on safe and constructive social networking, enabling teens to become responsible digital citizens.

In March 2010, three students were suspended from Southeastern Regional Technical High School after posting derogatory and sexually explicit messages about its principal and other staff members on a Facebook fan page. The students were not only suspended from school, but face possible legal charges (Downing). In 2009 a fourteen year old girl from New Jersey was arrested and charged with possession and distribution of child pornography after posting sexually explicit pictures of herself on her MySpace profile (Lewin par 10). One of the more disturbing accounts of social networking use among teens is that of Anthony Stancl, an eighteen-year old high school student, who created a fake Facebook profile belonging to a non-existent teen girl utilizing it to convince male classmates to send in nude photos and videos of themselves. Stancl then blackmailed at least seven of these males into sexual acts by threatening to release the photos and videos onto the internet (McCarthy par 3). What is alarming about the previous news is that most teenagers are often unaware of the legal consequences their social networking may bring. Also, a majority of teens are unaware they may be targets for victimization. Some teens probably do not realize that social networking creates permanent records that future employers or college admission committees may one day review. Teenagers' lack of awareness surrounding the consequences of social networking creates an immediate need for education. Social networking use among teens provides an unharnessed educational opportunity. Educators are at the frontline of the solution and must seize upon the teachable moments that social networking provides, first through education and awareness of the forum itself and second by capitalizing on social networking use in the classroom to enhance the classroom experience.

Social networking plays an integral role in the lives of teenagers. It is how they interact with their peers, foster friendships, seek information, and plan what they are doing on a Friday night. It is estimated that "at least 90% of adolescents use the internet [...] and approximately half of all

adolescents communicate with friends and meet new online users via social networking sites” (Dempsey et al 962). The online environment creates new social challenges for teens, opening up opportunities for them to become victims of peer aggression, sexual predation or unknowingly becoming criminals. With these new social challenges comes the need for education surrounding these issues in relation to social networking sites. As educators have a deep interest in their students’ educational and personal growth, it is logical to look at teachers to provide social networking education to their students. A physical education teacher would not let a student jump into the deep end of a swimming pool without knowing how to swim, so why should parents and teachers let teens dive into social networking without arming them with the proper skills necessary to swim the internet? By equipping students with the knowledge of proper usage of social networking sites, the consequences their posts may have, and internet safety skills, educators have the opportunity to advocate for a safer online environment.

How can society equip teenagers with the knowledge necessary to allow them to successfully swim the internet? One possible solution is to incorporate social networking education into the classroom. Teachers can educate their students of the possible dangers lurking on the internet and provide them with the tools to encounter that danger. Much like health teachers educate their pupils regarding safe sex practices, the same should be done for social networking. Imagine a classroom where students are taught not only the reasons for securing their online profiles, but how to do it. This education would promote safe usage of social networking sites within schools and encourage students to practice safe social networking outside of the classroom. Also, educating students on safe and appropriate usage of social networking sites would possibly prevent the adverse effects of these sites.

Social networking is not just a vile place filled with child predators, cyberbullying, and opportunities to turn teenagers into unwilling criminals; it also provides invaluable benefits, including opportunities for self-reflection, identity exploration and formation, and social and academic support. Social networking creates opportunities for teachers to seize and use this underutilized educational tool to enrich the academic lives of their students. A mathematics teacher in Minnesota creates podcasts for his students so they can review problem solving as much as they need to (Lemke and Coughlin 16); a civics teacher in Pennsylvania capitalizes on discussion boards to facilitate a debate on the Electoral College in a virtual environment (Taranto and Abbondanza 39). Both of these examples exemplify how social networking can be used to enrich education. According to Lemke and Coughlin, “today’s children and youth are immersed in the participatory Web 2.0 cultures outside of schools, but too many are being asked to check their technologies at the schoolhouse door” (5). By embracing the Web 2.0 culture of teens and opening the doors for education to incorporate social networking and other web based programs into the classroom, educators can become champions for change and ensure that this generation of tech-savvy youth is engaging the internet in an educational way.

Social networking is an underutilized educational tool. While many teachers believe social networking in the classroom is a distraction, consider the benefits that social networking can

bring, including active participation from students with the potential to lead to this deeper learning, a channel for shy students to find their voice and the virtual extension of the classroom beyond the school walls. According to a recent study conducted by the Consortium for School Networking (CoSN), approximately 75% of school districts surveyed nationwide stated that Web 2.0 technologies has a positive influence upon their students, with 67% stating it led to an increase in student interest in school (Lemke and Coughlin 7). A perfect example of how social networking can be utilized in the classroom to enrich educational opportunities and increase student interest is Kate Messner's english class at Stafford Middle School in Plattsburgh, NY. Ms. Messner incorporates Twitter into her classroom during the study of the book *Operation Yes* by Sara Lewis Holmes. Holmes and her editor held a Twitter chat discussing their collaborative work on the book. The students attentively watched the Twitter chat and joined in by tweeting their own questions. This Twitter chat led to the virtual extension of Ms. Messner's classroom. They were no longer just a class of fifteen students and a teacher, but also a "children's author in Virginia, a book editor in SoHo, and another half dozen children's writers from around the country, all talking about writing and revision" (Messner 45). This example of the use of social networking in the classroom is not a distraction, but a virtual extension of the classroom, allowing students to become active participants in the learning experience.

Further examples of how educators nationwide are harnessing the benefits of social networking include a biology class in Michigan sitting in on an open heart surgery and a teacher in Minnesota creates podcasts enabling students who cannot attend class see the day's lecture (Lempke and Coughlin 16). Both of these examples illustrate how teachers utilize social networking to grab students' interest and keep them engaged in their education. By capturing students' attention and infusing excitement into the learning experience, social networking use in the classroom has the possibility of being extremely promising. In the COSN study, 55% of students who were exposed to Web 2.0 technology in the classroom had a highly positive change in quality of their homework along with over half of all student participants reporting a higher interest in school (Lempke and Coughlin 7).

While social networking in the classroom can provide a myriad of benefits to students, it is banned in a majority of school districts. In the CoSN study, 72% of school districts ban social networking sites because students will waste time on them, it is a distraction to learning and safety issues (Lemke and Coughlin 9). While some students will still use social networking as a distraction in the classroom, consider that these may be the same students who may create a distraction in class by passing notes or chatting with their classmates. Also, while these are legitimate concerns as teachers are constantly worried about their students' safety, especially in online forums, consider the fact that teens still utilize these technologies outside of the classroom and would benefit from positive modeling on how to utilize the technology. An educator from Canon-McMillan School District in Canonsburg, Pennsylvania which utilizes social networking in the classroom, states "banning social networking [...] is not only inappropriate but also borderline irresponsible when it comes to providing the best educational experiences for students" (Taranto and Abbondanza 38). By incorporating social networking into lessons,

teachers model and teach their students digital citizenship which is what students need to know to engage in activities on the internet in a constructive, beneficial, and appropriate fashion. (Taranto and Abbondanza 38). Perhaps one of the most encouraging statistics is that in the CoSN study, of the districts that collected data on Web 2.0 technology, there was not a single negative impact noted (Lemke and Coughlin 38). The absence of negative impact of social networking use in the classroom illustrates that although educators have valid fears regarding social networking use in the classroom, not only do the benefits outweigh the risks, but statistics back this up as well.

Social networking is not a new phenomenon. In fact its roots can be traced back to the 1970's when BBS (Bulletin Board Systems) was introduced. This enabled users to communicate via code and allowed them to download files and games. BBS maintained its popularity into the 1980's and 1990's as the internet gained momentum. American OnLine (AOL) came onto the scene in the 1980's and was very popular in the 1990's. AOL members were able to create and view others member profiles and also instant message each other. In 2002, Friendster was launched under the premise that everyone in society is connected and currently has over 3 million users (Nickson par 14). LinkedIn was created in 2003 as a network for business people and boasts 30 million users to date (Nickson par 15). In 2003 the launch of MySpace occurred. Its site gained instant popularity and featured music, videos and a "feature filled environment" (Nickson par 16). Facebook was created in 2004 by a Harvard student and was opened to the public in 2006, and, as of today, it has over 150 million users (Nickson par 17). Finally, Twitter was launched in 2006 as a micro-blogging service, enabling users to post what they are doing at any given second in time.

Although social networking, in one form or another, has been around since the 1970's, its rapid rise in popularity since 2003 has brought benefits and issues. (Duncan 528). First is the issue of adolescents lying about their ages in order to gain access to social networking sites (i.e., MySpace users must be fourteen years of age or older to create an account) (Duncan 530). Opponents of social networking use among teens believe this creates an environment that is not developmentally appropriate (Duncan 561). Social networking also exposes youth to the possibility of becoming victims to online child predators. Although teens may take great precautions to keep their personal information private, they may unwittingly expose themselves by posting a picture of themselves wearing a shirt with their school name on it or their peers may unknowingly expose their privacy (Duncan 538). Another challenge that social networking presents is that teens often utilize them to seek information and may, in the process, find incorrect information or adopt unhealthy views (Duncan 541). Finally, cyberbullying is another issue that social networking sites may foster, as the online environment gives bullies the perception of anonymity, which may encourage more volatile comments and the opportunity to victimize a greater number of people (Dempsey et al 963). All of these challenges, however, bring opportunities to learn, and in turn, foster a harmonious virtual environment in the same manner that teachers foster a harmonious classroom environment. Social networking education in schools should provide curriculum around these challenges as these technology related

challenges are part of the world teenagers live in. The online forum and social networking is not a fad; it is here to stay. Students would benefit from education informing them of ways they may unknowingly compromise their online safety and security, consequences of cyberbullying, ways to deal with being cyberbullied, and also how to determine if a website provides credible material.

The statistics in the CoSN study show that only 16% of the school districts surveyed utilized social networking in their classrooms (Lemke and Coughlin 33). While the benefits of incorporating social networking in the classroom are vast, it is unfortunate that many students are not exposed to this enhancement of their educational experience. As a superintendent in Montana states in the CoSN study, “walls, doors and windows are nonexistent. Learning and teaching, can happen anywhere and at anytime” (Lemke and Coughlin 43). With all of the benefits of social networking use in the classroom, why are teachers not utilizing this educational tool? According to the CoSN study, many different reasons are cited, including the fact that many teachers themselves do not know how to utilize many web applications, including social networking sites (Lemke and Coughlin 23). A technology director at a school in Michigan is quoted as saying, “teachers and administrators don’t know enough to support their students’ world [...] teachers teach like they were taught; administrators administrate like evaluators of the past [...] we are a different world” (Lemke and Coughlin 23). Today’s students are digital natives brought up from birth surrounded by computers and technology, and they deserve an education that mirrors the needs of the current generation. Part of an educator’s job is to prepare youth to not only graduate from school but to be “competitive and responsible economically, politically, environmentally and socially” and ready them to thrive in those realities, which include social networking and Web 2.0 technologies (Lempke and Coughlin 6). More than 95% of district administrators in the CoSN study also admit that the incorporation of Web 2.0 technology in the classroom will require new teacher training (Lemke and Coughlin 11). While it is understandable that the costs of implementing any new program is of great concern in today’s budget cutting climate, the overall positive impact on the education of the students far outweigh these costs. Also, a majority of Web 2.0 technologies can be found on the internet for free, including setting up a Twitter or a Facebook account

Another barrier to social networking use in the classroom is fear for students’ online safety. While the fear is a legitimate concern, the statistics surrounding online victimization of teens suggest that the media may be over sensationalizing the dangers. Online victimization is, more often than not, committed by one’s peers and “most sexual solicitations of teens online are by peers” (Collier 36). In fact, online sexual solicitations of teens have decreased steadily from 19% in 2000 to 4% in 2005 (Tynes 576). For those 4% of teens, a classroom lesson on social networking safety would prove beneficial. Imagine a classroom where online sexual harassment and cyberbullying is discussed and safe media use is emphasized and practiced; perhaps in this classroom the students would be less apt to engage in destructive online behaviors.

How can teenagers of today become model digital citizens of tomorrow? First, through education on appropriate and safe usage of the very forum that consumes over ten billion minutes daily of time worldwide (Hafner par 1) and secondly through incorporating social networking into the classroom lesson to enrich the learning experience. In order to ensure that students are modeling safe and healthy online behaviors they must be taught what those behaviors are. Teachers, along with parents, are charged with educating youth and providing them with the skills that are necessary to prosper in the world. Society cannot expect teens to know what to do online and act appropriately without guidance; just as we teach our children what is right and wrong in the “real” world, the same needs to be done in the “virtual” world. While instructing students on how to keep their profiles secure and warning them of the dangers on the internet, educators are providing the first step towards successful digital citizenship. School districts have the opportunity to not only educate and teach students safe digital media usage but also incorporate digital media into everyday classroom experiences. Teachers can also tap into Web 2.0 technology as a resource to extend their traditional classroom lecture. Imagine teaching a lesson on globalization and Skyping, online video chatting with another person, people who do business with each other in the US and Hong Kong; this is exactly what one teacher in Illinois did to lend deeper meaning to the learning experience (Lemke and Coughlin 16). By tapping into social networking and other online tools in the classroom, students can take virtual fields where they can connect online to any place around the world and turn an ordinary classroom lesson into an interactive and extraordinary learning experience.

Social networking among adolescents is not just a fad; it is part of their culture. While social networking can expose teens to danger, they are exposed to the same dangers in real life as well. A parent or teacher cannot expect a teen to abandon the internet and be able to thrive in modern society as computers, technology, the internet, and social networking is utilized in all aspects of modern life, even in the workplace. This is why social networking should not only be included as a valuable tool to enhance the classroom but should also be utilized as an opportunity to teach students the skills that ensure safe and enriching use of social media. Remember the students who were suspended from school for defacing their principal on Facebook? One of these student’s parents eliminated access to the internet in their home, yet her son was still able to gain access to the internet, defame his principal and do the very things that his parents feared (Downing). Perhaps if his school offered curriculum surrounding safe and appropriate social networking, he would have realized that not only is his behavior harmful, but it is against the law and now a permanent part of his digital record, where future universities and employers can view what he has done online. Teens need the education on how to utilize social networking in a positive, safe manner in order to become productive digital citizens, and as teachers are tasked with educating the leaders of tomorrow, it is only logical that this digital education be taught in schools as well.

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