

INTEGRATION OF SOCIAL NETWORKS TO THE EDUCATIONAL PROCESS

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One of the most important pieces of using by students social networking technologies their engage in «friendship-based ways», which most adults are familiar with. These uses help students stay connected to the people who they know in their physical spaces-their school friends, the people they meet at summer camp, or their teammates, among others. But the other way that youth are beginning to connect using these tools is more compelling. That is, students are using social networks to «explore interests and find information that goes beyond what they have access to at school or in their local community». And in these «interest-based» interactions, they are connecting to peers and adults outside of their physical spaces, people who they don't know but with whom they share a passion. They become at once teachers and learners in these spaces, and, in the process, they learn about the things that school can't or won't teach them. In both of these interactions, whether friendship based or interest based, students engage in «self-directed, peer-based learning» that looks very different from most of their experiences in university.

The Internet and broadband technologies offer the possibility of breaching the space-time boundary of classrooms. Student use of the Internet, while it demands a reasonable level of English reading skills, offers expansive opportunities for student project work. Students working on authentic problems can access resources that are more complex and interactive. They can communicate with experts working in their area of inquiry. Such access can support more active, involved and self-directed learning and the development of extended learning communities. The authentic, up-to-date, multimodal material and data that can be accessed via the web can be motivating and create a sense of contact with the outside world. However, students need to know how to navigate the web with safety. They need to learn how to respond to inappropriate material and where and what it is safe to publish online. Teachers need to balance student safety with the benefits that come about when students take ownership of and publish their work. However, it needs to be remembered that students need to be supported in the development of learning to learn and information literacy skills.

From the friendship-based and interest-based perspectives, there are some ready-made sites and tools out there to help us, namely Facebook. It make group forming around the people we know or the interests we pursue almost too easy. But from an educational standpoint, they also pose a

unique set of problems and challenges for classroom use, ones that can be fairly well overcome, as always, through a combination of personal experience, communication, instruction, and good policy.

In reaffirming the need for the growth of the Internet social initiatives we can give a few facts. For Facebook, the site that was started in a Harvard dorm room in 2004, the numbers are, in a word, staggering. At the beginning of July 2009, Facebook was growing by an amazing 700,000 accounts per day, and its total membership was close to 250 million (making it the fourth-largest country in the world where it a physical place). But here is the real kicker: The fastest growing segment of Facebook users today is the over-55 set, meaning parents and grandparents are finally starting to figure out what all the fuss is about.

The key to both of these sites for educators is to move beyond the friendship-based connections and really explore the potentials of the networked, interest-based learning that's possible within these frames. They are places where sharing and collaboration and even collective action can take place in some profound ways, and they are spaces that might allow us will see it. And what they do with it is anyone's guess.

Now, you can also leave messages to your individual friends by writing on their «wall». To do that, click on your friend's name and then enter a greeting (or photo, or video, and so on) where it says "Write Something." You can also use your friend's walls as ways to find other people to connect to or engage in some conversations around what interesting topics may be posted there. If you want to see what people have been writing on your wall, just click on «Profile» at the top when you are logged in and make sure the «Wall» tab is selected in the middle column.

Whenever someone posts a picture to Facebook, he has the option of «tagging» the people in the picture, which means the picture is automatically added to the «tagged» person's photo album. That means that even though you may not have posted that embarrassing celebration photo from five years ago, someone who has a copy of that photo could do just that and tag you with it. Figuring out how you will deal with these realities will go a long way toward helping you mentor your students through their own use.

Most uses of Facebook by teachers are grounded in the creation of either public but usually private groups on the site where classes can exchange information, write on each other's walls, answer questions, and create a shared space of materials for the course. Once you add the basic information about your group on the first page, the second page allows you to set the transparency. Most teachers go with a «closed» group, which means the front page is open to view, but all photos and discussions and everything else are open to members only. Other options on the page allow administrators to control who can add links, photos, and videos. Inviting stu-

dents to the group from the next page is easy as long as you have an e-mail address for each.

But information on the Web does not guarantee the motivation to seek research knowledge. After a review of the literature, some author's suggest that the establishment of more effective communication networks between researchers and the educational practitioners may improve the desire for, and understanding of research, and to raise its credibility. A second suggestion, however, is that the teachers should become more involved in the research process. This could mean several possibilities:

1) that educational practitioners become partners with academic researchers, or

2) that educational practitioners themselves become researchers. It is this second possibility that will now be considered.

Teachers can generate their own research findings. It is not unusual for university to develop their own research projects to resolve a highly specific problem or need. In fact, in recent years there has been a growth in both the literature and practice of teachers becoming researchers, or engaging in what is known as action research. However, this occurs primarily in schools with a larger number of teachers who have postgraduate training. When principals have a larger number of teachers with postgraduate qualifications, they are able to turn inwards for their source of new knowledge, that is, they generate this knowledge through their own in-school research projects. Thus, the higher the levels of qualifications of teachers, the more conducive is the intellectual climate, and the more likely are the teachers able to take a more professional role in research. This finding is consistent with the argument that university, in which teachers can play more professional roles, are likely to be successful university.

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