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FACT SHEET

June 2008

Social Networking: My Space on School Space?

by Heather Bunch

Social Networking (SN) has become a highly attractive phenomenon for today's youth. Fifty-five percent of teens who go online use Social Networking Sites (SNS), such as My space, Facebook, Friendster, and Xanga. Youth are wildly drawn to SNS as a forum for self-expression and socialization with their peers. Youth have developed very sophisticated technology skills and attention spans and learning styles that accompany these skills. Many educators are beginning to explore ways to use the allure of SN for educational purposes. Using SN for educational purposes is a promising strategy for increasing student engagement in their learning; however, there are some challenges to ensuring safe and appropriate use of these sites at schools.

What is Social Networking

SN is a form of communication that takes place on the internet. SNS allows users to create a public or semi-public web page that serves as a digital representation of themselves (interests, personal style, affiliations) and connect or link to other "friends" who have done the same. Social Networkers can interact through chatting, messaging, email, video, voice chat, file sharing, blogging, and discussion groups.

Educational Uses of Social Networking

- Web pages for communicating assignments and curriculum content.
- Online collaborative projects.
- School newspaper.
- Online academic journal.
- Creation of a wikipedia (online encyclopedia).
- Teleconferencing.

Educational Benefits for Youth

- Provides a venue to learn and refine ability to exercise self-control.
- Helps youth to relate with tolerance and respect for other's viewpoints.
- Allows for self-expression, self-discovery, and identity formation.
- Exploration and access to different cultures; cultural competence.

- Increases social learning.
- Increase literacy and technology skills
- Increases Developmental Assets: boundaries and expectations, social and cultural competence, personal identity, and commitment to learning.
- Provides arena for adults to teach students how to engage in "healthy" SN behaviors
- Provides an authentic and relevant format for learning.

Concerns About Social Networking at Schools

- Effective monitoring ability for safety and adherence to Acceptable Use Policies.
- Inappropriate content.
- Cyberbullying.
- Teacher-Student boundaries.
- Blurred lines between academic and personal use.
- Disinhibition effect-sharing of inappropriate personal information.

Guidelines for Schools

1. Use school-sponsored closed sites.
 - These sites can be monitored and controlled better than commercial sites.
 - Teachers should not require students to use commercial social networking sites for academic purposes. Use of commercial sites increase the likelihood of accessing personal information about teachers or students and blurs the lines between personal and academic.
2. Netiquette.
 - Staff: Use same guiding principles for social boundaries with students online as you would in person.
 - Staff: Do not "friend" students (you wouldn't invite yourself to their parties).
 - Staff: If a student "friends" you, maintain same teacher-student boundaries.
 - Staff and Students: Never post personal information (full name, address, cell phone number, name of school) that people outside of your "real life" social network can access.

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- Staff and Students: Present yourself online the same way you would in person. (Colleges and employers have been known to view SNS).
3. Policies
- Establish and enforce clear and consistent Acceptable Use Policies for approved school based SNS and unapproved commercial SNS in Student Handbook/Code of Conduct for both students and staff.
 - Create ability for school personnel to bypass SNS filters for commercial sites in order to become informed of how these sites work and school or student specific safety issues.
 - Ensure effective technical monitoring and student's ability to bypass filtering for commercial SNS.
 - Ensure equitable access to SNS for all students, if required for educational purposes.
4. Training
- Great opportunity to use youth as the experts. Have them lead trainings for teacher, parents, and other students.
 - Provide staff development for teachers on best practices for how to use SNS for lesson planning. Acceptable Use Policies and internet safety.
 - Provide opportunities to educate parents about school-based sites and age appropriate monitoring of commercial SNS at home.
 - Encourage students to transfer Netiquette and safe use of school sponsored SNS to use of MySpace and the like.

Additional Resources:

National School Board Association Report:

<http://www.oakland.k12.mi.us/Portals/0/Learning/creatingandconnecting.pdf>

See what one school is doing with Moodle:

<http://aiken.moodlerooms.com/wb/pages/academics/moodle/moodle-at-aiken-high-school--introduction.php>

Edweek online chat transcript: "Using Social Networking to Reach Students and Monitor Behavior" http://www.edweek.org/chat/transcript_03_12_08.html?levelId=1000&

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Resources and References

Safety:

www.wiredsafety.org/internet101/blogs.html

www.isafe.org

www.netsmartz.org

www.cyberbullying.org

<http://staysafeonline.org/index.html>

http://criminaljustice.state.ny.us/missing/i_safety/mediafiles/blogbeware.pdf

Technology & School-based sites:

www.weblogg-ed.com

www.schooltube.org

www.moodle.org

www.blackboard.com

<http://www.ala.org/ala/yalsa/profdev/professionaldevelopment.cfm>

Google: course management systems

Acceptable Use Policies:

<http://www.justice.gov/criminal/cybercrime/rules/acceptableUsePolicy.htm>

http://www.education-world.com/a_curr/curr093.shtml