

Student Blogs: Virtual Communities or Predator Menus?

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Contemporary collegiate life is nothing if not in transition. As the millennial generation matriculates in 21st century institutions of higher education, evidence of the dramatic changes on today's college and university campuses can easily be seen in the impact of the Internet. With *Instant Messaging*, video conferencing, file sharing, *Texas Hold 'em* poker, and a plethora of other online and interactive resources, there are few things that today's contemporary collegians are unable to do virtually.

One such interactive resource that may present the potential to significantly affect the personal lives of today's collegians—and not necessarily in the ways they intend or may be expecting—is the virtual collegiate community, e.g., Facebook or MySpace (see <http://www.facebook.com> or <http://www.myspace.com>). These are examples of a virtual communities or social networks, where students can post information about themselves in order to make connections, both on and off campus. These online entries can include photos, contact information, personal interests and preferences that range from music and movies to intimate predilections of every description. *Anyone* with an email address can register and gain access to Facebook and MySpace...and herein lies an issue for administrators and faculty as well as students to consider.

In the early days of party line telephones, when anyone sharing the party line could pick-up the phone and listen in on a personal conversation, today's students post all sorts of intimate information about themselves on the Internet, likely thinking that it will only be accessed by other students. However, these virtual communities may serve to attract predators that lurk in the Internet Sea seeking vulnerable prey.

But assuming for the moment that students know what they are doing when they post intimate facts about themselves and their lifestyle on line, such blogs may present professional staff and faculty in higher education with an opportunity to use this digital resource to invite students to step back, take a look at their lives and thoughtfully consider the question, "Are the choices I am making regarding how I present myself to others, including my practices involving alcohol, others drugs, and sex, resulting in the type of personal experiences I want to have in my life?"

I started a practice last spring as an experiment. When students were referred for an alcohol screening I would check to see if the student had a Facebook.com profile. If the student had such a page, I would review it to get a sense of how the student perceived him or herself, especially regarding their drinking and other substance use: Most entries were what I would call, "PG or PG-13" rated.

I did visit a few pages, however, with comments, nicknames and/or photos posted that suggested rather high-risk behavioral practices. I have come to believe this virtual tool may be useful in exploring possible inconsistencies in a student's self-reports on personal preferences and behaviors. Obviously, there cannot be any condescension in one's voice when discussing apparent inconsistencies between self-reports and these online entries, and in true motivational interviewing style, one should never argue with a client. It may be worth considering if the student's entries can play a role in engaging a student in a meaningful conversation about personal choices related to drinking.

It occurs to me that these online communities—or should I say student entries about themselves IN these communities—may also be useful when discussing issues related to self-esteem, self-respect, students concerns about how they are perceived, etc. By talking about how students refer to themselves in their profiles, e.g., the language they use, the images they post, etc., we may be able to invite students to recognize that we all teach others how we would like to be treated in the way we present ourselves in public.

How DOES a serious student affairs professional discern what is voyeurism and entrapment from what is providing realistic feedback on how students present themselves in public?

Regardless of what one thinks about such a practice, it is not without its proponents and critics. For example, even though the Internet is public - and one should probably never put anything online that one did not want parents, employer, or any other person to see - do administrators who visit student blogs and then ask about what is posted there run the risk of being perceived as voyeurs? Even if an administrator has the best of intentions when accessing student blog information to help students see the big picture, does this represent a step too far in the quest to help students?

Those who lean towards either pole in such a debate are likely to articulate arguments for their positions quite well. But what about those in the middle who are genuinely wrestling with both the pros and the cons of this question? How DOES a serious student affairs professional discern what is voyeurism and entrapment from what is providing realistic feedback on how students present themselves in public?

Here are some additional questions and points-of-view to be considered when deciding to use Facebook or other online blogs in our prevention and student affairs efforts:

Is what a student writes in a blog fact or pure fabrication?

While the tenor of the blog can still be enormously helpful in terms of discerning student levels of self-esteem and self-perception, practitioners should be wary of presenting information as "fact" about the student. Quoting a blog could result in instant loss of credibility.

Do administrators who access student blogs risk learning too much and thereby assume a responsibility, to do something?

Do we act on suicidal ideations read on a student's blog? What do we do with implied/inferred information gleaned from entries that a student does not explicitly reveal, e.g., relationship violence, issues related to *coming out*, inappropriate involvement of an RA in an AOD incident, etc? And is there liability if we do nothing?

Is there a potential for student backlash?

Do faculty or staff visitors to student blog entries open themselves to the criticism that, "Administrators are invading our personal space" and if so, how can such a response be addressed and shared as an educational moment with students about the inherent risks in posting too much information in such a public forum?

(The previous 3 bullets are based on personal correspondence with Ken Schneck, Dean of Students, Marlboro College, in a personal correspondence. They are used here with permission).

[Student Alter Egos]

The veracity of student posts to such Blogs can be questioned. Some suggest that the phenomenon of "fictionalizing" events or even personal characteristics of individuals is a common occurrence in the web sites such as Facebook. There's quite a bit of support in the research about digital personas that supports this -- students, like the rest of us, create "alter egos" on-line that fulfill some social function, at least in the mind of the individual creating the fictionalized self-persona. As a practitioner, I'm fascinated by what a high risk alter ego says about the student's perceptions of what makes him or her socially successful, or what they believe is a reflection of the norms for the culture. I've also heard many students say they create these fictionalized self-personas as a form of parody, a way of pointing and laughing at aspects of the culture. This, too, is interesting and could yield wonderful conversations with students. There are some WONDERFUL books discussing the entire "on-line" culture from the field of Communication Studies.

[Teachable Moments and Learning Opportunities]

Though many of the potential pitfalls of the use of online Blogs like Facebook and MySpace have been mentioned, there are opportunities as well; i.e., teaching students about life in the digital "public square" being a primary example. Some universities send information to police to identify at-risk locations on and off-campus that are publicized by digital means in the same way that police investigate a party from a poster stapled to a community bulletin board or telephone pole. The attitude is "you advertise it, we attend it" and it serves as an excellent tool for limiting the dangerous "all-call" events as well as helping students learn about life in the public square, which is now on-line.

(The previous 2 bullets are based on personal correspondence with Thomas Workman, Assistant Professor of Communication Studies, University of Houston-Downtown in a personal correspondence. They are used here with permission).

For more information, visit www.boston.com/news/local/articles/2005/09/26/when_students_open_up_a_little_too_much/

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