

## Using Facebook and Other SNSs in K-12 Classrooms Ethical Considerations for Safe Social Networking

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### Introduction

Teacher educators are charged with preparing teachers with the tools that they need to be successful in the 21st-century classroom, including the technology skills required to communicate effectively with, and to prepare, our increasingly tech-savvy student populations. Teacher preparation programs have been under fire recently, as politicians and parents look to place blame for dismal learning outcomes that are more commonplace than one might expect from an industrialized nation. According to U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan (2009), “By almost any standard, many, if not most, of the nation’s 1,450 schools, colleges, and departments of education are doing a mediocre job of preparing teachers for the realities of the 21st-century classroom” (para. 3). Under such heavy criticism, many educators are open to exploring innovative ways to engage and educate their students.

A study of over 1,200 K-12 principals, librarians, and teachers found that, “[o]verall, a majority of educators (including principals) see a high value for social networking in education despite concerns about confidentiality and privacy, legal liability, professionalism, and the time required to implement social networking effectively” (“School Principals

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and Social Networking in Education,” 2010, p. 21). Bringing social networking sites (SNSs) into the pedagogical toolbox is a prime example of efforts to prepare teachers to deal with the increasing technological sophistication of our students and of the workplaces in which they will ultimately compete, but it comes with some potential risks.

The purpose of this article is to examine the potential risks of bringing SNSs into the classroom through of lens of Moor’s (1999) just-consequentialist theory. Moor compares the setting of ethical policies in the fast-changing world of technology to a sailor trying to set a course while sailing. His analogy could not be more appropriate for educators’ attempts to cope with the question of online social networking in schools.

A SNS is defined as a web-based service that affords users three functions: (a) the ability to construct a public or semipublic profile that exists within a bounded system; (b) the ability to articulate a set of other users with whom they share some connection; and (c) the ability to interact with the set of other users defined within the system (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). In other words, SNSs are web-based communication hubs, with varying levels of exclusivity, which allow participants to craft a self-image that is presented to others. Greenhow, Robelia, and Hughes (2009) argued that the creative and interactive elements of Web 2.0 sites, particularly their collaborative and socially relevant nature, can make learning more meaningful. Acknowledging that a 21st-century learner will utilize the Internet for research purposes, they highlighted the importance of information literacy, including the ability to critically evaluate the veracity and authenticity of information culled from the myriad sources available online. Nevertheless, proponents of a larger role of web-based technologies in classrooms implore us to examine the technological, ethical, educational, and social implications of such inclusion (Greenhow et al., 2009).

In the short time since its release in 2004, Facebook has garnered an enormous following. With a reported U.S. following of over 160 million users and nearly a billion worldwide users (Gonzalez, 2013), Facebook is the most popular SNS. A large segment of its U.S. following is school-aged children who devote time to Facebook and other SNSs on a daily basis. For example, 74% of 7th to 12th graders report having created a profile on a SNS. Further, 42% of 11- to 14-year-olds spend better than an hour per day on these sites, while 53% of 15- to 18-year-olds spend an average of 48 minutes per day engaged in online social networking (Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010). It should not be surprising that many students would welcome the opportunity to use SNSs in school, irrespective of any safety or privacy concerns that may exist. In this regard, schools certainly have the right and an ethical obligation to ensure

that only safe and appropriate sites are accessible by their students. However, schools' and districts that decide to simply block widely used sites relegate educators to bystanders, as their students acquire online habits and practices that may not be in their best interests. Perhaps the decision by some educators to block these sites, instead of addressing safety issues, can be explained, in part, by the fact that many educators were introduced to technology in a much different fashion than is the current generation of students.

Over a decade ago, Prensky (2001) described a generation of students whom he termed "digital natives," who have grown up immersed in technology. He contended that these students, as a result of such immersion, process information in ways that are different from those of the previous generation (to whom he referred as "digital immigrants"), who had to learn to adapt to such technology. That many of our most veteran teachers are digital immigrants creates a situation in which students may be more comfortable learning from technology than their teachers are instructing with it. Nonetheless, from a deontological perspective, teachers have a responsibility to help students meet the needs of the current technological landscape, which means teachers' learning the language and customs of the cyber-world that will be expected of their students in the 21st century classroom and workplace. Teacher education programs arguably have an opportunity and responsibility to bridge this divide by ensuring that preservice teachers gain familiarity with technology tools that can enhance their ability to connect with a wired generation of students.

Notwithstanding its widespread appeal, Facebook is the target of strong criticism, particularly from some in the educational field. It has been blamed for a variety of negative impacts, including lower grades, narcissism, cyber-bullying, privacy breaches, and even sexual assault (Blake & Ornstem, 2010; Buffardi & Campbell, 2008; Debatin, Lovejoy, Horn, & Hughes, 2009; Kirschner & Karpinski, 2010; Livingstone & Brake, 2010). Even though many teachers and administrators see potential benefit in incorporating social networking sites into classroom instruction, administrators have to balance their enthusiasm with the potential safety and liability issues that might arise. With litigation always a concern in today's educational environment, some principals and school districts choose to steer clear of anything that presents risks to student safety, or that may prove damaging to teacher reputations and livelihood. Balancing student safety against the need to prepare students to use current technology results in an inconsistent message from educators as to the importance of technology infusion in school settings.

Considering both the potential benefits and risks, the issue of in-

corporating SNSs in K-12 classrooms is a potentially divisive one. On the one hand, SNSs are an incredible medium that has the potential to change collaboration in ways that we could not even imagine a decade ago, e.g., collaboration beyond the walls of the classroom. Notably, preparing students to exercise good digital citizenship can provide them with communication skills that can enhance their transition into a more technological workplace. On the other hand, we cannot ignore the potential for SNSs to provide an avenue for bullies, pedophiles, and other antisocial individuals to gain access to students who, while digital natives with technology, may be naïve and unsuspecting from a social standpoint. Thus, from an ethical perspective, one can make arguments both for and against the inclusion of this technology in K-12 classrooms.

Policies enacted by districts will influence the manner and depth in which teacher education programs must prepare their teacher candidates to deal with SNSs in instructional settings. A deontological approach would argue that all students have the right to become proficient in online communication platforms, not just those who can afford access to them in their homes. If schools block access to SNSs, then only those with home access to the Internet will be in a position to develop proficiency in using them, leaving an element of the digital divide intact. Further, teacher education programs have a responsibility to prepare their teachers to facilitate the acquisition of these digital-age skills. But a conventional consequentialist view suggests that both the benefits and harms must be taken into account when making the decision on inclusion.

### The Promise of Social Networks

Recently, educators have called for increased involvement of SNSs, such as Facebook, in K-12 education (Greenhow & Robelia, 2009; Kessler, 2010; Luckin et al., 2009; Tomai et al., 2010). At first glance, this might seem like a perfectly natural evolution for Facebook, which began in 2004 as a private online community of Harvard college students. The platform subsequently opened its access to high school students, then corporate networks, and ultimately to anyone who wanted to participate (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). This unlimited access, some would argue, negatively affected the overall perception of the purpose of the site.

Momentous changes have occurred in the Internet as it moved from a venue of fairly static information in its first generation (referred to as Web 1.0) to an interactive virtual meeting place where users contribute heavily to the nature and structure of the “places” that make up Web 2.0 (O’Reilly, 2005). According to Rozema (2007), “Unlike the early Web [1.0], in which expert users, called Webmasters, developed sites with

unchanging content, Web 2.0 is characterized by frequently updated sites, publicly constructed and shared information, and easy-to-use online applications, most of them free” (p. 31).

Educators, particularly those involved in distance and/or blended education, have long utilized the Internet to provide static information and as document repositories to supplement their instruction. However, the two-way communication and user-authoring capabilities associated with Web 2.0 tools have opened up enormous possibilities for the enhancement of web-based educational experiences. More recently, free access to many of online tools has brought about increased efforts to infuse this technology into classroom exchanges, with the idea that, because our students are already heavy users of SNSs, we might as well leverage this organically acquired know-how to facilitate more engaging and efficient learning (Kessler, 2010).

Greenhow et al. (2009) noted the ability of Web 2.0 technologies, such as Facebook or MySpace, to help youth to develop their online identities, which ultimately affect their offline identities. They also indicated that, due to the risks associated with poor digital citizenship, including bullying, inappropriate scrutiny, or privacy intrusions, there is a need for educators’ active involvement in students’ online identity development. Finally, they highlighted the opportunity that teachers have to guide students in the safe and appropriate use of cyberspace rather than letting them try to figure it out on their own.

In regard to learning, researchers have found that K-12 students often express interest in using online technologies, such as SNSs, to support familiar school learning activities but are more reticent about using them for more sophisticated learning activities (Luckin et al., 2009). For instance, Luckin et al. reported that secondary students found using online tools for presentations or communication appealing but were more cautious about using them for shared construction of knowledge in a public format; further, few engaged in publishing self-created content for wider consumption on the web. Luckin et al. stated that the collaborative aspects of Web 2.0 tools “might support deeper levels of engagement through feedback, peer review and the development of a sense of audience and shared purpose.” (p. 101). They noted that learners are already motivated to use Web 2.0 technologies, such as SNSs, but that a greater level of teacher understanding is needed to fully exploit these tools in ways that will help students develop higher-order thinking skills.

Most students, at least by secondary school, either have a Facebook account or are aware of what the platform is about. Research that suggests that such platforms can facilitate the shared construction of knowledge

and peer interactions that support learning adds to the perception that SNSs, such as Facebook, could be a catalyst for classroom engagement and collaboration. To facilitate effective use of Web 2.0 technology in the classrooms, teachers are encouraged “to be willing to embrace risk [and] to consider small ways of navigating existing cultures and reframing old contexts to incorporate new ones.” (Luckin et al., 2009, p. 102). Even if we deem the benefits of SNSs worth the potential risks, a plan for managing those risks is warranted.

### SNS Risk Management

A teacher’s decision on whether to incorporate SNSs into classroom activities must take into consideration at least three areas: (a) psychological safety; (b) appropriateness of teacher-student interactions; and (c) protection of privacy.

#### ***Psychological Safety***

After a 1995 *Time* magazine article titled “CyberPorn” brought attention to the sheer numbers of pornographic images readily available on the Internet, lawmakers have attempted to protect children from the pornography industry’s increased presence in cyberspace (Tavani, 2011). Further, despite consistently being challenged by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), Congress passed and enacted the Child Pornography Protection Act (CPPA), which prohibits child pornography, and the Child Internet Pornography Act (CIPA), which requires schools and libraries to filter offensive content.

Legislators and educators alike clearly recognize the potential psychological harm that exposure to offensive content may inflict and, hence, the enactment of laws to prevent this kind of content from showing up on a classroom computer display. CIPA, in particular, addresses this issue for K-12 in that it ties E-Rate funding, which provides Internet access for schools at subsidized rates, to the filtering of inappropriate content on school computers (Tavani, 2011).

Schools and libraries that receive E-Rate funding, which provides Internet access for schools at subsidized rates, must meet the following requirements:

Schools and libraries subject to CIPA [Child Pornography Protection Act] are required to adopt and implement an Internet safety policy addressing: (a) access by minors to inappropriate matter on the Internet; (b) the safety and security of minors when using electronic mail, chat rooms and other forms of direct electronic communications; (c) unauthorized access, including so-called “hacking,” and other unlawful activities by

minors online; (d) unauthorized disclosure, use, and dissemination of personal information regarding minors; and (e) measures restricting minors' access to materials harmful to them. ("Children's Internet Protection Act," n.d., para. 3)

Items "a", "b", and "e" are of particular concern with the use of Facebook in the classroom. Filters on school computer networks prevent students from accessing content that has been identified as inappropriate or harmful to minors (i.e., items "a" and "e"). Although no Internet filter software can claim 100% effectiveness in eliminating unwanted material, these programs provide a good measure of protection and are continuously updated to address new threats of inappropriate material that may circumvent the filters. Ybarra, Finkelhor, Mitchell, and Wolak (2009) found that, in homes with blocking, monitoring, and filtering software on their computers, teens had 65% lower odds of being exposed to unwanted sexual material than were those in homes without such filters.

Nonetheless, student safety and security (i.e., item "b" of CIPA) are still potentially at risk when students engage in communications on SNSs. This is especially true when the network relies upon users to report threats, promotions of self-harm (i.e., self-mutilation or suicide), bullying and harassment, hate speech, sex and nudity, and violations of identity privacy. As the Facebook Community Standards page states, "As a trusted community of friends, family, coworkers, and classmates, Facebook is largely self-regulated" ("Facebook Community Standards," n.d., para. 3.). Further, although the page indicates that content that violates their terms may be removed, this kind of after-the-fact filtering may be of little consequence once the harm has been done. An example of the kind of damage that can be done prior to such community regulation is the case of a 16-year-old girl who was drugged and gang-raped by half a dozen young men in British Columbia. A 16-year-old boy took photos and a video of the attack and posted them to Facebook. The postings were removed from the site after being reported, but the video and photos later reappeared on other sites as a result of being downloaded previously ("Police can't block Facebook rape images," 2010). Even though the offensive items are no longer available on the Facebook site, the victimization of the girl continues through the online proliferation of the criminal attack.

As difficult as it is to detect and prevent inappropriate material from getting through the network filters when that material is text-based, the task is nearly impossible when it comes to images and videos that can be posted by any user at any moment or to live personal video feeds delivered via Facebook's partnership with Skype ("See your Facebook friends' latest news in Skype," 2011). Prior to this kind of digital gate-

way, school officials were rightfully concerned about unsavory characters who might try to communicate with students through a chain-link fence or by physically coming onto the campus. Now the internet can provide these same characters access to children as long as they have an internet connection. And since Facebook is an unaffiliated commercial site, school districts do not have the same control over it that they would with a business partner, such as those that provide content management software.

It is arguably the responsibility of every educator to do all that is possible to protect kids from the potential dangers of cyberspace communities. At the very least, we are obligated to ensure that laws enacted for this purpose are supported by our policy decisions at the district and school levels. The requirements of CIPA appear to be very difficult, if not impossible, to uphold if an open SNS such as Facebook is permitted unfiltered entrée into the classroom. The lack of control over the structure and privacy of the platform presents daunting challenges to educators' efforts to control the content to which their students are exposed.

Nonetheless, a potentially promising update to the Facebook platform is its "Groups for Schools" component (Carter, 2012). This new platform reportedly will allow collaboration and file-sharing between students who have an active ".edu" email account at a certain school and is expected to incorporate more education-specific components as it continues to be developed. Controlled access would make this kind of approach ideal for K-12 settings, although it is only being offered initially to higher education institutions.

It should be noted that there are Web 2.0 platforms that have been built, from the ground up, as education sites. These include free sites such as edmodo.com, coursesites.com, joomla.org, and moodle.org as well as commercial platforms such as Adobe Connect, Wimba.com, Blackboard.com, and eClassroom.com. These education-specific sites are password protected, and their reputations depend on effective monitoring. They provide a more controlled environment, which should ease the concerns that some administrators have over the risks prevalent in the Internet. These sites present an ideal avenue for engaging students without many of the risks associated with open SNSs. Whether a teacher decides to use Facebook or one of the free or commercially available alternatives, controlled access is critical to maintaining a safe learning experience.

### ***Appropriate Teacher-Student Interactions***

Another concern with the use of SNSs in the classroom is the potential for inappropriate or disruptive interactions between students and school officials, including teachers. Recent news reports provide examples of teachers who have engaged in or attempted inappropriate



sexual relationships with students via Facebook (Durand, 2010; Smith, 2010; “Teachers ousted for Facebook ties to kids,” 2010; Van Dusen, 2010), which, more often than not, justifiably resulted in the loss of employment for school personnel involved. Due to concerns about student safety and the possible liability that results from such actions, Louisiana enacted legislation that requires school districts to document all electronic communications between school employees and K-12 students, including those on SNSs (State of Louisiana, 2009). Additionally, Virginia’s Board of Education drafted guidelines for the prevention of sexual misconduct and abuse to assist school boards in complying with state laws (Pyle, 2010). Their guidelines include “clear and reasonable policies governing communications between students and school board employees—including electronic communication—that promote transparency, accessibility and professionalism” (p. 3). Further, Missouri’s state legislature forbids its teachers from being “friends” with students on any SNS in a manner that allows exclusive direct-contact (White, 2010).

Inappropriate communications are not always driven by school employees. There are examples of student actions that have resulted in the disruption of the school environment. Students have faced disciplinary actions related to Facebook postings for a range of transgressions, including the expulsion of a high school senior in Nashville, Tennessee, who became upset with his basketball coaches and posted “I’m a kill em all” (Sarrío & Bazar, 2010); the suspension of a 13-year-old Concord, New Hampshire, girl for posting that she wished Osama bin Laden had killed her math teacher (Hernandez, 2011); and the suspension of a 15-year-old Oak Grove, Missouri, girl for posting nasty comments about a classmate that led to a fight (“Missouri girl suspended for Facebook post,” 2010). In the latter two instances, the parents argued that the school had no right to suspend the girls for comments posted from home, contending that these are parenting issues.

If comments are posted at home, they can still lead to disruption in the school. But because cyberspace is not really a “place,” it is not always clear where, exactly, the infraction occurred. One can understand how some parents might feel as though schools are overstepping their authority when they punish students for postings that occur away from campus, even if the comment has an impact on school campus environment. Once we isolate the deed from the medium, however, it is clear that this is something over which the school has purview.

It can be argued that misuses of SNSs by students and teachers do not justify banning SNSs from the classroom but rather points to a need to impose disciplinary actions, as needed, just like with other school activities. Some unsettling court rulings indicate, however, that deal-

ing with cyberspace transgressions is not clear-cut. A federal judge in Florida denied immunity to a school principal who suspended a student for creating a Facebook group page titled “Ms. Sarah Phelps is the worst teacher I’ve ever had” (Gentile, 2010). The student was suspended for “cyberbullying” her teacher at the time of the incident but later sued to have the suspension wiped from her record. The judge ruled that the case could proceed to trial, but it was settled out of court (Crabbe, 2011).

In another case, a federal judge ruled that two students should not have been disciplined at school for parodies of their respective principals that were created on off-campus computers and posted to MySpace. In one case, an eighth-grader created a fake profile of her principal, which included his actual photo, claiming that he was bisexual and a sex addict. It also hinted that he was a pedophile. In the other case, a 17-year-old senior created a parody profile of his principal that described him as a drunk and a drug user. In both cases, it was argued, in court documents, that the parodies were protected free speech that did not cause disruption to the school environment (Knight, 2011). These examples highlight the difficulty that schools and districts have in trying to determine which actions are legally acceptable in dealing with the constantly evolving cyberspace landscape.

### ***Protection of Privacy***

A publication by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), “A Parent’s Guide to Internet Safety,” provides guidelines for parents to minimize the chances of an online predator victimizing their children (Freeh, n.d.). Parents are advised to instruct their children to “never give out identifying information such as their name, home address, school name, or telephone number;” and “to never upload (post) pictures of themselves onto the internet or on-line service to people they do not personally know” (p. 5). Nevertheless, because of the way that profiles are created and accessed on Facebook, these actions are commonplace occurrences for many children.

The recognition by the U.S. Congress of the potential dangers of allowing commercial websites to collect personal data from young children resulted in the Children’s Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA) in 2000 (Bartoli, 2009). This act requires that verifiable parental consent be obtained prior to the collection of personal data from children under the age of 13. Children over 13, however, are comfortable with providing personal data over the Internet, particularly on SNSs. Over half of teen users of SNSs with chat capabilities (e.g., Facebook, MySpace) post personal information online, and the more time that they spend on these sites, the more likely they are to engage in online behaviors

that can pose threats to personal safety (McCarty, Prawitz, Derscheid, & Montgomery, 2011).

Even when Facebook users do not intentionally share their personal data with strangers, the access that Facebook and other SNSs provide to “friends of friends” may result in unintended sharing of information with unknown people. SNS profiles can include information such as names, addresses, school names, and photos. A profile that a teen has created to be accessible to a select group of friends can become available to each person that any group member has “friended.” In this way, the chances of a teen’s personal information falling into the hands of the wrong person can increase exponentially. Even when a parent or teacher has guided a student on making good choices in selecting friends, parents are powerless in providing the same guidance to everyone in the student’s circle of friends.

Advocates for the use of Facebook in the classroom may argue that its users are allowed to set profile settings to “private” to limit access to their personal information. However, a national survey of youth aged 10 to 15 indicated that only two-thirds utilized this access limitation feature (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2008). Further, the SNS profile is not the only concern in regard to being targeted by predators. Ybarra and Mitchell found that, of the 15% of youth who reported unwanted online sexual solicitation, it more often occurred via instant messaging (43%) or chat rooms (32%) than specifically on the SNS. Facebook and other SNSs have chat and instant messaging capabilities embedded in the sites, making them vulnerable to this type of unwanted activity.

Once a connection is made between a predator and an underage potential victim, it is the secrecy of the communication that may lead to an inappropriate relationship. This is why the Missouri ban on teacher-student Facebook “friending” only prohibits direct private contact (White, 2010). It is these private communications that may facilitate more self-disclosure and lead more quickly to an intensified relationship than does face-to-face communication in the presence of others (Wolak, Finkelhor, Mitchell, & Ybarra, 2008). Direct and private contact is a form of Internet “whispering.” Just as we would not be comfortable with a teacher who routinely engaged in conversations with specific students via whispers, we also should not be comfortable with Internet conversations that go on outside the purview of administrators, parents, or peers.

## Conclusions

From an ethical standpoint, it is imperative that school districts require control of who has access to the cyberspaces used in conjunction

with classroom instruction. With this assurance, the collaborative benefits of online networking are more likely to be welcomed into the teachers' instructional repertoire. Teacher education programs that address the implications of open versus controlled access sites with their teacher candidates provide them with the tools to evaluate current platforms, as well as the ones that are likely to arise in the future.

Moor (1999) proposed just-consequentialism as a unification of deontological and consequentialist ethical theories, which he presents as a practical approach to examining the ethics of computers and information technology. By setting policies, rather than absolute rules, we can maintain the flexibility to allow justified exemptions as the need arises. Notably, our technology policies must fulfill our duties as educators to prepare our students while, at the same time, protect them from the harms that may be associated with those efforts. However, the previously mentioned cases, wherein courts ruled in favor of students who posted seemingly mean-spirited commentary about school personnel suggest that it will take more than new legislation to address the challenges that schools face. In addition to keeping acceptable technology use policies current, digital citizenship instruction also should be a part of the core K-12 curriculum.

Teacher educators must consider the importance of preparing teachers to cultivate the technological skills and digital citizenship of their increasingly connected students. Neglecting this important responsibility leaves our young digital natives unprepared to navigate cyberspace responsibly and may deprive them of avenues to increased learning possibilities.

Policies that prevent private one-to-one communication between teachers and students that do not generate a permanent record are extremely important to ensure the public's trust that the users of these networks are operating above-board. Also important is the need to include netiquette (online etiquette) instruction in our preparation of preservice teachers. In this respect, lessons that use static screenshots of Facebook pages may be helpful in teaching students how to set up their privacy settings and how to interact appropriately with others. This would not involve incorporating Facebook as a SNS, per se, but would allow teachers to model responsible online behaviors without the risks of an open environment.

Technology advances occur seemingly by the minute, and policies drafted for technology-based offenses can become obsolete even before they are officially enacted. Thus, to prevent potential problems, some U.S. school districts have decided simply to block this particular type of technology from their school networks. Educators who believe that the benefits of these 21st-century tools are worth the added responsibility of instructing students how they should be used should refer to the

International Society for Technology in Education's (ISTE) guide for teaching digital citizenship in schools (Ribble, 2011).

In the final analysis, educators must weigh the potential advantages of using SNSs in educational settings against the risks that such inclusion would entail. If the proper precautions are not taken, student safety, privacy, and psychological well-being are at risk. Additionally, administrators risk school reputation and legal liability.

Schools will likely continue to explore the use of Facebook and other SNSs as classroom tools to take advantage of their benefits for collaboration and to prepare their students for an increasingly technological world. Short of having access controls in K-12, such as those in the "Groups for Schools" pages for higher education, Facebook remains a platform with more risk attached than the education-specific platforms that are readily available.

Teacher education programs must accept the responsibility of ensuring that teachers enter their classrooms with an understanding of both the transformative capabilities of new technologies and the risks that they may present. By highlighting the advantages of education-specific platforms in terms of controlling potential risks, teacher educators will likely facilitate increased teacher competence and confidence in incorporating the technology that is vital for student learning in the 21st century.

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