MY SPACE OR YOURS?

Social networking is causing a stir on campuses. With millions of K–12 students actively participating in these online social clubs, educators need to be aware of the issues and concerns being raised.
social networking sites have been expanding rapidly since 2003. Friendster opened to the public in March 2003 and initially expanded membership at a rate of 20% a week. Friendster made a big splash because of its unprecedented access to the coveted 25–35-year-old demographic. Since then, many big Web players have started up social networking sites.

Although Friendster enjoyed an initial membership explosion, many users seemed to get bored with the technology and move on to other things. It was MySpace, which was created for musicians as a place to showcase their music, that seems to have weathered the initial boom. With nearly 2 million new MySpace accounts created every week and a user base that may be pushing 90 million, social networking is an established Web phenomenon.

The social networking sites that now seem to be most successful (in terms of large memberships) are those that have been created around a central theme and maintain a sort of voyeuristic appeal.

My first exposure to social networking sites was a newspaper article that talked about how students at George Washington University were changing their social habits. When meeting someone, students would run back to their computers to check out the new person according to what they could find on Facebook.

Facebook is the brain child of a college student, Mark Zuckerberg. Where Facebook has been successful is that it has been one of the first sites to explicitly base its online community on the physical campus. Last year, Facebook made itself available to high school users. Facebook continued to make headlines last school year as high school students throughout the United States joined. At a recent meeting of our area tech coordinators, Facebook was the one topic that everyone seemed to have in common.

One of the facets of social networking sites is the ability of members to join groups. Facebook members can set up special clubs, which were intended as a way for users to exhibit their personalities. Although this aspect may have good intentions, it has backfired and mushroomed into a source of cyber bullying and harassment. It is rather ironic that what was developed as a tool for students to connect and share ideas and be good netizens has evolved into a place that can be so powerfully negative and hurtful.

Of course, social networking does not have to be used in a negative way. Although these applications may be the key to seeking employment in the future, our newest challenge will be to figure out how to teach our students to use them in responsible and respectful ways. I guess that there’s a useful purpose to someone’s curriculum, but I’m hard-pressed to see it yet for the noise and ruckus it has created upon its arrival.

Any new technology, especially those attractive to students, poses an element of risk. From repetitive motion injury, retarded social growth, and radiation alerts, to pedophiles lurking in the technology shadows, there are and continue to be real problems related to technology. However, many of these problems were first associated with technologies almost no one questions today. Some may be only slightly related to technology in reality.

The current loud and sometimes raucous debate on the topic of social networking sites isn’t really different from previous menaces such as electronic calculators, television, e-mail, video games (and their cousins, edutainment titles). Real and imagined problems, reported anecdotally, almost always push defenders of technology into a hard-to-argue position. No one wants any child to be accosted by a predator.
Another important consideration is that of safety. Social networking Web sites require membership for access. Creating an account can require potential members to share personal information including but not limited to names, screen names, e-mail addresses, passwords, snail mail addresses, phone numbers, age, sex, and occasionally even income information. Many of the sites designed for adults indicate that fact clearly and require a birth date for account creation. However, checking the legitimacy of this information is virtually impossible, so it is relatively easy for minors to create accounts on these networks. Even more troubling, adults can just as easily masquerade as teens on the networks catering to them.

Although we continue to spread our message about protecting personal information, Facebook held an appeal that no previous social site had hit upon. It struck a chord with our students when they heard it was designed and implemented at Harvard. Our students perceived Facebook as something used at all the best colleges. Like a wildfire, our students joined the site, posted their pictures, and started collecting friends and getting in on the action.

Recent crime figures from the FBI show an increase in “online predator” arrests, with 1,649 made in the United States last year. Shocking and dismaying without a doubt. However, they attribute much of the rise in arrests to heightened awareness and more aggressive prosecution. Furthermore, there were more than 65,000 estimated arrests of sexual predators last year. That is nearly 40 predators who are not using technology to go after our students for every “high tech” creep who is. And of course, no one can know how many victims of online predators would have engaged in dangerous meetings without the Internet.

The most obvious sign that the debate is somewhat overheated is that few rational voices are pointing out that actively online students may actually be safer from predators than their more naive classmates. According to a Pew Internet and American Life Project study released in December 2005, “Bloggers, and to a lesser extent teens who read blogs, are Internet omnivores who explore, play with, utilize and generally inhabit the Internet with a greater abandon than their less blog-savvy counterparts.” That same study estimates the number of 12–17-year old bloggers at more than 4 million.

Undoubtedly, educators must take every opportunity to stress the dangers students face in the world today. At the same time, technology isn’t the biggest danger. Youngsters are vulnerable, they always have been. Demonizing social networks won’t end sexual assaults on juveniles, it just takes one potentially powerful tool out of educators’ toolboxes.

—J.V. Bolkan is the senior editor for L&L.

Social worth on networking sites is often identified not only by who you are friends with but by how many friends you obtain. Students were joining the networks of friends in their school and other schools as well.

Once we have personal information on the line, we have security worries. When Facebook hit our school, I contacted a friend at the Maryland state police to ask about the safety of these types of Web sites. At our school, we go through great efforts to teach our students about the dangers of giving out personal information. In addition to classroom instruction, we include visits from law enforcement and other guest speakers who are knowledgeable about Internet safety. Even after all of our educational efforts, Facebook lulled our students into a false sense of security by claiming that access was limited to other students. The site requires an e-mail
address that it can verify by the school’s domain name. This was attractive and seemed very safe to our students; however the police verified that the sites were not hacker proof and that predators would be able to masquerade and gain access.

Although Facebook claims to have verification of membership, they are not checking with the school, they are only validating an e-mail address. Our testing revealed that we could set up accounts for our school mascot and accounts that had been set up for the purpose of students delivering homework.

For some really good, concise information for students, parents, and educators about Internet safety, and specifically blog, diary, and profile sites, visit www.wiredsafety.org.

Ultimately, to combat the Facebook frenzy at our school, we had to block access from our network to the social networking sites that were most commonly used. This was a total reversal of our previous policies. With other technologies, I have held the belief that filtering is not a good thing. Hackers and predators can always find ways to break through. Indeed, many see it as a personal challenge.

Social networking sites have taken us, as educators, outside of our comfort zone. Like all other new technologies, we need to explore how we can continue to educate students about...
resources is for designing, references and tips for school, family, industry, media tools, a solid foundation for professional development and ideas & resources to integrate new tools for planning, using and teaching them that if they choose moments. However, we will still pursue teaching them that if they choose these resources, they need to remember that not only will their friends be looking at them, but their parents, teachers, college admission, and future employers will as well. Curriculum for Internet safety now need to include the risks and benefits of placing personal information and images online for the world to see.

**Resources**

Center for Safe and Responsible Internet Use: [http://www.cyberbully.org](http://www.cyberbully.org)
Electronic Frontier Foundation: [http://www.eff.org](http://www.eff.org)
Wired Safety: [http://www.wiredsafety.org](http://www.wiredsafety.org)

Joanne Barrett has been an independent school computer educator for more than 10 years. Her family has recently relocated and she is continuing her work as a computer educator at the Out-of-Door Academy in Sarasota, Florida.

Copyright © 2006, ISTE (International Society for Technology in Education), 1.800.336.5191 (U.S. & Canada) or 1.541.302.3777 (Int’l), iste@iste.org, www.iste.org. All rights reserved.