Social Technology as a New Medium in the Classroom

JEFFREY YAN

New modes of everyday communication—textual, visual, audio and video—are already part of almost every high school and college student’s social life. But can such social networking principles be effective in an educational setting?

At the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) where I teach, students spend a lot of time on Facebook and other social networking sites. There is also an emerging interest in sharing academic achievements through social sites. RISD students have populated a rich repository of e-Portfolios in a directory (http://risd.digication.com/portfolio/directory.digi) which allows faculty, alumni, prospective students and prospective employers to browse through student work. Giving students the ability to share their work in this way transforms them into authors and publishers. Brian Hutcherson, who recently completed a master’s in teaching at RISD, created a program e-Portfolio as part of his degree requirement and an e-Portfolio showcasing a specific lesson on toy design he created while student teaching. (http://risd.digication.com/curvin mccabe6/Home/) This e-Portfolio, which was shared publicly in RISD’s e-Portfolio directory, caught the attention of a highly regarded art textbook publishing company, Davis Publications, and was featured in their latest edition of School Arts magazine.

Connections and opportunities like this arise often when the work of teachers and students is shared beyond the classroom through social technology.

In addition, schools and colleges increasingly employ new kinds of communications such as blogs and wikis. Blogs. Blogs are simple online journals with entries organized chronologically—a structure many people find intuitive and easy to follow. New content is displayed prominently at the top, while older information gets archived.

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Youthful Indiscretions

Should Colleges Protect Social Network Users from Themselves and Others?

DANA L. FLEMING

Counting members in the hundreds of millions, online social networking communities such as MySpace and Facebook may prove nearly as transformative as the 1876 invention of the telephone. Creating a MySpace or Facebook profile is free and making online “friends” is easy—if you’re under 30. But students’ online identities and friendships come at a price, as job recruiters, school administrators, law enforcement officers and sexual predators sign on and start searching.

MySpace is routinely ranked among the top three most popular websites in America. The site was founded in 2003 by Tom Anderson, a graduate student at UCLA. Two years later, Rupert Murdoch’s News Corp. purchased MySpace for a reported $327 million. Beyond its financial success, MySpace boasts an international audience with more users than any other networking site in the world.

In New England, however, Facebook is a local favorite among college students and recent graduates, perhaps because it was founded in the region, by then Harvard sophomore Mark Zuckerberg. The first month the site went “live” in 2004, half of Harvard’s undergraduates signed up. Its popularity spread to other Boston-area campuses including MIT, Boston University and Boston College. By December 2004, the number of registered Facebook users surpassed one million. Facebook began by catering to undergraduates and for many years restricted membership by requiring all users to have a “.edu” email account. In recent years, Facebook has opened its site to a wider audience in order to serve the growing demand for online social networking. Yet, Facebook remains the most popular site among New England college students.

Other sites such as Friendster, LiveJournal and YouTube offer additional means for users to “broadcast” their innermost thoughts and secrets across the World Wide Web. To join, a user needs only an email address and a willingness to share his or her “profile” with other users. Profiles usually include pictures and personal descriptions, music and video clips, plus information about the user’s relationship status, school

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There is no practical way for colleges to monitor the content of these sites, as students’ profiles and postings are changing constantly. It would take a full-time staff working around the clock to scratch the surface of a single network. An aggressive monitoring approach can also backfire. When students find out that a network is being monitored by administrators, they frequently change networks, password-protect their profile or group or post misleading information to confuse and frustrate administrators, (e.g., one student advertised a frat party at a specific dorm room, only to leave a “gotcha” note for campus police).

While a blanket monitoring approach is infeasible, if not counter-productive, a targeted review of online social networking sites can be a good thing. For example, when a student exhibits signs of distress, a review of his or her online profile or blog may be appropriate. A review of a student’s profile may also be appropriate where that student is involved in a disciplinary proceeding. Courts treat people’s online postings as evidence in criminal proceedings, and college and university lawyers routinely check students’ online profiles. It stands to reason then, that schools are free to use content from these sites in their own judiciary proceedings. Colleges that wish to create a policy specially tailored to online social networking policies should review Cornell’s University’s “Thoughts on Facebook,” which cautions students about the personal risks and legal ramifications of online social networking, while at the same time acknowledging the benefits and popular appeal of such sites.

In this era of aggressive data-mining and total information access, students’ privacy is in peril. Advertisers are particularly interested in students’ personal information, as they try to tailor ads to individual users. For example, a restaurant may create an online advertisement based not only on the student’s geographic location, but also by noting that one of their “friends” is a regular customer. This type of targeted advertising helps to explain the financial success of sites like MySpace and Facebook where online advertisers can pay as much for online advertising space as they do for commercial slots on primetime TV.

Under the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), colleges have a responsibility not to divulge students’ personal information, sell their names, phone numbers and email addresses to advertisers or otherwise violate their privacy rights. But when students post their most intimate secrets online, how can schools protect students’ privacy?

Though many students believe that the information they post online is “private,” it’s not—and the simplest way to address the liabilities posed by these sites is to treat them like any other university activity, subject to the school’s code of conduct and applicable state and federal laws.

Dana L. Fleming is a Boston-area attorney specializing in higher education law.
Email: dfleming@seyfarth.com.

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Additionally, blogs offer RSS (real simple syndication) feeds that allow anyone to “subscribe” to be notified when new blog posts become available. Comments connected to individual postings on the blog give the author the opportunity to receive feedback from visitors.

Blogs are great tools for class interaction. Teachers can choose to have one blog to post teaching materials, in forms of images, files and links. Comments can be posted by teachers, classmates, parents or anyone who has been given access. Receiving feedback about coursework from not just a teacher, but also peers or possibly the outside world can be very empowering to students.

They are easy to set up and usually free of charge. Popular blogging platforms used in classrooms include Blogger (www.blogger.com) and EduBlogs (www.edublogs.org).

Blogs can be networked and created by teachers and students to form a community of blogs where students in a single class or even all students on a given campus can each present their own findings and discoveries. A colleague of mine, David Bogen, created a rich, active community with blogs at Emerson College (http://www.digital-culture.com). Students are publishing their work, thoughts and ideas on a regular basis. For example, students in the “Digital Culture” learning community post all their writing and multimedia work from several classes within the blog/portfolio environment, and use the course blogs for organizing collaborative projects.

Students are publishing their work, thoughts and ideas on a regular basis. Students are very capable of separating academic and social contexts. Emerson students use the blogs to collaborate academically, but Facebook to socialize.

Wikis. Teachers who want their students to be able to work together in an online publishing environment and need collaborative editing tools for students look to the wiki.

Wikis are often used for group-based writing projects, collaborative note-taking or brainstorming. Teachers can set up wikis for groups of students, allowing them to give feedback with equal footing, make suggestions and changes and jot down ideas. Everyone is an author of the wiki at the same time. Authors can start with very informal ideas and gradually edit and create drafts of their writing to be further edited and shaped by other authors of the wiki.

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The best-known example is Wikipedia (www.wikipedia.com), the online encyclopedia written collaboratively by users around the world. Its global popularity is a testament to the strength that a collective has when united to communicate, share and build content together. At a much smaller and more controlled level, the capabilities of a wiki in the classroom can broaden the learning experience, as student groups build rich, deep content over time. A great example can be found at Brown University’s wiki site (https://wiki.brown.edu/confluence/dashboard.action), topics from “Biomed” to “Men’s Club Soccer” can be found, with students collaborating across campus. In an interesting wiki created for a Chemistry Language course, students are building a collaborative reference of chemistry language terminology (https://wiki.brown.edu/confluence/display/CHEM/Chemistry+Language). Scrolling down the page, readers see a growing list of terms that students submitted with questions as well as instructor prompts, audio recordings of students using this terminology and chemistry equations.

Commercially available Wiki software such as PBWiki (www.pbwiki.com) and WikiSpaces (www.wikispaces.com) are very popular in the classroom today because of their ease of setup (usually 15 minutes or less) and their inherent flexibility and collaborative editing features. In Brown’s Chemistry Language wiki, the instructor creates the structure of the wiki, invites students to join and then provides the students with guidelines on what kind of content should be submitted and how often (https://wiki.brown.edu/confluence/display/CHEM/About+This+Site). Providing the students with information about the purpose and format of the wiki leads to greater success within a course.

Online Learning Communities. Teachers looking for school-specific collaboration tools may be interested in established, educationally based social networks and online learning communities that can address school- or district-wide communications. An example would be Elgg’s educational social network (www.elgg.net) that leverages blogs. Another example is Digitation’s learning community (www.digication.com), which is based on e-Portfolios. These educationally based communities have safeguards found in open social networks, like MySpace and Facebook. These networks are administered by schools giving them the ability to control the level of openness, define permission settings and disallow outsiders who do not have passwords keeping the network safe and secure.

One unique feature that Elgg offers allows schools to run and host their own social network locally on their own servers. If a school has the necessary expertise in supporting such a network, staff can download the software free of charge and have complete control over the underlying code. Having access to the underlying code enables schools that prefer to be able to customize and manage software on site using school owned hardware and IT resources to have that flexibility.

Digitation’s e-Portfolio based online learning communities give teachers and students in K-12 and higher education institutions the ability to personalize and share their content. At RISD’s Art + Design Education Department, the students utilize e-Portfolio templates, which provide areas for syllabi, assignments, completed assignments with reflections by students and then evaluation comments by faculty. The e-Portfolio contains an archive of courses and assignments for each student for the entire degree program. From this documentation, faculty provide regularly scheduled critiques throughout the program. The student may then use the information to create a ‘job search’ e-Portfolio. An example of such an e-Portfolio, also referred to as a Program Portfolio can be seen at http://risd.digication.com/mwall/Home.

Collaboration Motivates Participation. The new generation of Web 2.0 solutions are easier to use, more engaging and are making a larger impact upon collaboration and communication in the classroom than complex technologies of the past. Technologies adopted in schools today, including blogs, wikis, social networking and online learning communities, are keeping teachers and students connected in and out of class. They are creating opportunities for groups to share, collaborate, showcase and grow together. In addition, they allow exchange of information and ideas not only within the confines of a classroom, but across schools, districts, states and the world. Even 10th grade computer science classes are taking advantage of social technologies for cross-cultural exchanges.

Teachers are amazed at how simple tools for sharing work and ideas can positively transform the classroom. Students who may avoid live class participation are leveraging new communication forms to become more active and “vocal” in a virtual class. The freedom to publish and share ideas creates a learning environment that empowers and motivates both teachers and students.

Jeffrey Yan is co-founder of Digitation. He teaches a graduate course at Rhode Island School of Design on integrating technology into the classroom. Email: jeff@digication.com.