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Want To Be My “Friend”? What You Need To Know About Social Technologies

Concerned Parent - Websites like MySpace are overflowing with cyberbullies and sexual predators. All social networking websites should be filtered to protect children and young adults.

Enthusiastic Teacher - Online learning communities provide wonderful opportunities for students to engage in global discussions, data sharing, and cooperative problem-solving.

Like most tools, social technologies have both positive and negative applications. While the news media is filled with scary stories about the harmful consequences of social networking software, little attention is given to the opportunities this technology provides children and young adults to share ideas, debate issues, and make global connections.

Over the past several years, people have used the term Web 2.0 to describe the second generation of web-based services that allow people to easily socialize, collaborate, and share information online. Children and young adults are attracted to these highly interactive tools. Rather than simply viewing static web pages, they chat with friends, critique movies, and share digital photographs.

According to Lee Rainie of the Internet Pew Internet & American Life Project, 87% of all youth between the ages of 12 and 17 use the Internet. Technology plays a special role in the lives of today's teens. The first generation to grow up with interactive media, they comfortably manipulate, remix, and share content. Rainie notes that 57% of teens contribute their creations to online common areas including artwork, audio and video, photos, and creative writing.

It's essential that the teacher librarian work with students, teachers, and parents to understand the harmful and helpful applications of social technologies both inside and outside the school setting.

What is social technology?

Social technology refers to computer-mediated communication (CMC) environments that connect people for cooperation, collaboration, and information sharing. The result is can be a dynamic online community.

Weblogs, wikis, forums, instant messaging, and email are all social technologies that facilitate information sharing and online community formation. These communities can be accessed through many types of devices including laptops and handheld devices such as PDAs and cell phones.

Stowe Boyd identified three characteristics of social software: interaction, feedback, and connections.

Social Interaction. This software allows conversational interaction between individuals or groups using tools such as instant messaging and collaborative workspaces. For example, teams may get together with friends online rather than meeting at the mall. New friends may be invited to join into these conversations.

Social Feedback. Social technology generally provides a mechanism for reacting to others in the form of guest books, comments, or reputation and rating systems. Beyond friends they know locally, Lee Rainie notes that teens expect to have conversations with the creators of web content and want to register their critique of others' work.

They also want their voice heard on other issues such as voting in online polls and rating services such as reputations on eBay. Although some people applaud this activism, others are concerned about the potential negative impact of websites such as RateMyTeacher. <<http://www.ratemyteachers.com/>>

Social Connections. A third mechanism of social technology is support for the creation of new relationships. For example, MySpace <<http://www.myspace.com/>> uses personal profiles and invitations for "friends" as a way of establishing new contacts. The ability to identify people with similar interests or needs is at the core of social software.

A child recovering from cancer may feel isolated, however a social network such as those sponsored by the American Cancer Society <<http://cancer.org>> can facilitate contacts with others with similar experiences.

Why are social technologies so popular with young people?

Teens are particularly drawn to social technology because it meets many of their socialization needs. Young people talk about being unique and different from others, but at the same time seek affirmation from their friends.

Explore the ABCs of social networks.

Activism. Young people want to be involved with the world beyond the local community. They want to share. Whether it's voting on American Idol or participating in a global warming forum, they want to feel part of what's happening in the world. For some students, their interests lie in participating in online activities related to celebrities and sports figures. However some young people are seeking ways to help the environment, becoming politically active, or building international cultural connections.

Belonging. Relationships are important to tweens and teens. Boyfriends, girlfriends, best friends, and peer group friends are all nurtured online through the use of rating systems, virtual reputations, and commenting functions. Kids crave a sense of identity and being embraced by a group.

Contact. Students want to be at the center of the action. Since "everyone" is using social networks, students want to be part of the crowd. Like being invited to a party, young people see social networks as a way to meet people and keep up-to-date on what's happening in their world. They are concerned about missing out on something important and use technology to stay in constant contact.

Data Collection. Young people gather information through social networks. They share poems through text postings and ask for feedback, create polls about school issues, and ask friends for help with personal problems or homework. Unfortunately many students

are unable to effectively evaluate the information they gather from these various social contacts.

Freedom. From the mall to the family room, most physical spaces in a young adult's world are supervised. Children seek online environments where they can exert their independence. While some students experiment with drugs, others use the online environment to test ideas or share fantasies. While this experimentation can be harmless, it can also be dangerous.

What is online social networking?

Social networking is a particular application of social software. Networking websites facilitate the creation of informal and formal connections between people with similar interests to form online communities. Sometimes called "friend of a friend" sites, they are often associated with places such as MySpace. According to the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, 61% of 13 to 17-year olds have a personal profile on a social networking site.

Most social networking sites ask users to enter information about themselves into "profiles" and provide search tools to help participants identify people with similar interests based on criteria from these profiles. While some social networks are totally open, others require users to be invited to join a group.

Communication can be synchronous (live interaction) or asynchronous (delayed). In addition, it may involve two or many people.

One-to-one. Some communications are individual to individual such as email, audio and video conferencing, and instant messages.

One-to-many. Personal profiles, announcements, testimonials, web postings, forum messages, websites, and blogs are intended for one person to communicate their ideas to many people. Many social networks contain digital sharing areas including reviews, bookmarks, photos, audio, video, or other digital documents. Flickr <http://www.flickr.com/> is a website where people share their digital photographs. Delicious is a social bookmarking website designed to

help people store and share their favorite websites. MyWeb2.0 from Yahoo also provides shared bookmarks.

Many-to-many. Collaborative software such as wikis are used to build projects where many people can share their ideas in creating a joint project such as wikipedia <<http://www.wikipedia.org>>. Polls, surveys, rating systems and other data collection tools are also a way for many people to cooperate. Data from many remote sites might be used to gain a better understanding of a problem or process. For example, students might record and share data about animal migration patterns or river water.

Some people fear that these social networks will replace face-to-face interaction. However rather than conflicting with people's community ties, many are finding that social networks fit seamlessly with other types of communication. These social networks allow people to maintain contact with family and friends that are geographically dispersed. In addition, social technologies allow people to find support networks for a wide range of needs.

What online social networks do young people use?

New online social networks are being introduced daily. Most social networking sites such as MySpace don't allow young people under the age of 14 to join. However it's common for underage children to fib about their age in order to participate. Because of the notoriety of MySpace, many teens are seeking lesser-known websites with fewer regulations.

Adults. The biggest online social network is MySpace. Other social networking websites include Friendster <<http://www.friendster.com/>>, MSNSpaces <<http://spaces.msn.com/>>, Orkut <<http://www.orkut.com/>>, and Yahoo360 <<http://360.yahoo.com/>>. Some social networks are designed for photo sharing such as Flickr <<http://www.flickr.com/>>, Slide <<http://www.slide.com/>>, and Zorpia <<http://www.zorpia.com/>>. There's a growing number of special interest communities such as BlackPlanet <<http://www.blackplanet.com/>> and MiGente <<http://www.migente.com/>>. Classmates <<http://www.classmates.com/>>, Reunion <<http://www.reunion.com/>>,

and MyFamily <<http://www.myfamily.com>> focus on making connections among families and friends.

Others like media-rich communities such as YouTube <<http://youtube.com>>, Multiple <<http://multiple.com>>, Buzznet <<http://www.buzznet.com/>> that emphasizes audio, video, and photos, and FriendsOrEnemies <<http://www.friendsorenemies.com/>> with an emphasis on music.

High School. Although many high school students use adult resources, there are some websites designed specifically for young people. Bebo <<http://www.bebo.com/>>, My Yearbook <<http://www.myyearbook.com/>>, and Facebook <<http://www.facebook.com/>> were designed for high school and college students. Sconex <<http://www.sconex.com/>> bills itself as the unofficial website for your high school. Study Breakers <<http://www.studybreakers.com/>> and Tagged <<http://www.tagged.com/>> are for high school students.

Some students prefer to use blog-based tools such as LiveJournal <<http://www.livejournal.com/>> and Xanga <<http://www.xanga.com/>> to journal and build communities.

Few social networking sites are designed for younger children. However two subscription services are being developed for children 8 to 14 including imbee.com <<http://imbee.com/>> and Thinkronize from the producers of NetTrekker.

For a long list of social networks, go to Wikipedia's List of Social Networking Websites. <
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_social_networking_websi>

Like any technology, it can be dangerous in the wrong hands. Help young people find and use tools responsibly.

How do social networks impact the school library media program?

Social networks are something educators can't ignore. They've become part of the culture of young people. Information Power

stresses the importance of preparing students for life beyond the walls of the school. The key is balancing the concerns with the benefits.

Model Positive Applications. Meredith Farkas is a Distance Learning Librarian at Norwich University. In her blog, she points out that many libraries are using social networks to reach out to their patrons.

Brainstorm ways that you might use the power of social networks in your school. Many schools are developing intranets that can be used for social technology activities within your school. Show positive applications of social networks through online book clubs, literature circles, and other communication and collaboration-rich activities connected with reading, writing, and information.

If you're still having a hard time relating to the allure of social technologies, try a specialized network. For example, have some fun with LibraryThing <<http://www.librarything.com/>>. This network is designed for people to share the contents of their personal libraries and find out what others are reading. You can review books, find out what others with similar interests are reading, and make social connections. Check out an example at LibraryThing: Educapes <<http://www.librarything.com/profile/eduscapes>>

Discuss Time Management and Multitasking. Although young people are convinced that they can watch music, listen to music, IM their friends, and do homework at the same time, they may be over-stimulated and less productive than they think. Although they are a generation of multi-taskers, they also experience what Linda Stone calls "continuous partial attention." In other words, they try to accomplish several things at once by scanning through resources looking for the most useful information. This can lead to surface-level perceptions rather than deep understandings. Discuss the importance of study skills and a focus on deep thinking.

Promote Information Skills. Help students make responsible decisions about social networking. Whether it's discussing the threat of cyberbullies or talking about misinformation at social networking websites, it's important to get students talking about their experiences

with social networks. This is a great opportunity to remind students about ethical behavior, the importance of evaluating information, and how to deal with uncomfortable online situations.

Supervise Student Activity

Focus on supervision rather than restriction by providing opportunities to participate in meaningful online interactions. In response to concerns about minors accessing social networking sites, legislation has been introduced that would require schools and public libraries to block commercial websites with features such as blogs, chats, messaging services, and other interactive elements. This would expand the current Children's Internet Protection Act (CIPA) <<http://www.fcc.gov/cgb/consumerfacts/cipa.html>> that requires filtering software. However filters and blocks won't prevent your students from finding a backdoor into social networks. Make students aware of the dangers.

Use the following online resources for added information about online safety.

NetSmartz <<http://www.netsmartzkids.org/>>

GetNetWise <<http://kids.getnetwise.org/>>

Wired Safety <<http://www.wiredsafety.org/>>

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