

KEY WORDS IN INSTRUCTION

Social Technology and Social Networks

by Annette Lamb and Larry Johnson

A second generation of Web-based applications and services has emerged over the past several years allowing people to easily socialize, collaborate, and share information online.

These applications, known as Web 2.0 with their highly interactive tools, are the basis for “social technology” and are especially attractive to children and young adults. Rather than simply viewing static webpages, they can now chat with friends, critique movies, and share digital photographs.

Social Technology Defined

Social technology refers to the connection of people for cooperation, collaboration, and information sharing through computer-

mediated communication (CMC) environments. Computers, personal devices, and cell phones can all be used to access these dynamic, virtual communities.

Characteristics of Social Software

Stowe Boyd, an authority on social tools, has identified three characteristics of social software:

- Interaction—allows virtual conversations between individuals or groups
- Feedback—provides tools for commenting, rating, or reacting to the content shared by others
- Connections—supports the creation of new relationships helping to establish new contacts through profiles and invitations to join (<http://www.darwinmag.com/read/050103/social.html>)

Social technology connections can be synchronous (live interaction) or asynchronous (delayed). They may involve one-to-one (email, instant messaging), one-to-many (blogs, Web postings), or many-to-many (wiki) communication.

The Basics of Social Networks

Social networks facilitate the creation of informal and formal online connections. These networks were made popular by websites such as *MySpace* (<http://myspace.com>). These “friend of a friend” sites are attractive to young people seeking peer support and online communities. Although, according to the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, most social networks state that users should be at least fourteen years old, 61% of thirteen- to seventeen-year-olds have a personal profile on a social networking site.

These social networks can appeal to many different interests. For example, book lovers find interest in a growing number of specialized networks. 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 others with similar reading interests, and make social connections (<http://www.librarything.com/profile/eduscapes>).

Although many high school students use adult resources, some social networking websites are geared to young people (see Table 1).

Annette Lamb, a Senior Lecturer and Adjunct Professor for Online Course Development, and Larry Johnson, an Adjunct Professor at the School of Library and Information Science at Indiana University at Indianapolis provide additional information about blogging on their website (<http://escrapbooking.com/blogging/>).

TABLE 1

Social Networks

Geared to Young Adults

Bebo. <http://www.bebo.com/>

Facebook. <http://www.facebook.com/>

Imbee.com. <http://imbee.com/>

My Yearbook. <http://www.myyearbook.com/>

Sconex. <http://www.sconex.com/>

Second Life for Teens. <http://teen.secondlife.com/>

Study Breakers. <http://www.studybreakers.com/>

Tagged. <http://www.tagged.com/>

Thinkronize from NetTrekker.
(under development)

Social Intelligence, Social Skills, and Authentic Learning

In his new book *Social Intelligences: The New Science of Human Relationships*, Daniel Goleman notes that employers seek people who demonstrate signs of empathy and can apply social skills in the workplace.

Educators sometimes downplay the importance of social intelligence; however, social interaction is playing an increasingly important role in educational and psychological theory. For example, Howard Gardner, in his book *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligence*, identified the interpersonal intelligence as one of the multiple intelligences (1983).

This interpersonal domain has been added to Bloom's cognitive, affective, and motor skills domains and includes skills in seeking/giving information, proposing, building and supporting, including,

disagreeing, and summarizing.

Danny Callison states that interpersonal skills, practiced through cooperative learning, can greatly deepen the meaning of information literacy and inquiry. He also points out the importance of providing opportunities for students to verbalize their understandings as part of transforming information and making linkages to new ideas (2006, 351-355).

Information Literacy and Social Technology

The importance of preparing students for life beyond the walls of the school is also stressed in the publication *Information Power*. The key, as stated in this publication, is balancing the concerns of social networking with the benefits of on-line communication and collaboration. To be information literate, young people must be able to practice responsible and ethical behavior related to technology use. They must also be able to participate effectively in groups and evaluate the information generated in social environments (1998).

Some ways the library media specialist can guide students, teachers, and parents in effective use of social networks follow.

Know the Networks

Most social networking sites are not designed for children under the age of fourteen. Educate yourself about the privacy policies, code of conduct, and advertising allowed on social networking sites. Seek social networks such as *MSN Spaces* and *Yahoo 360* that allow users to restrict access through password protection. Better yet, set up an intranet at your school for school-based social activities.

Be Proactive

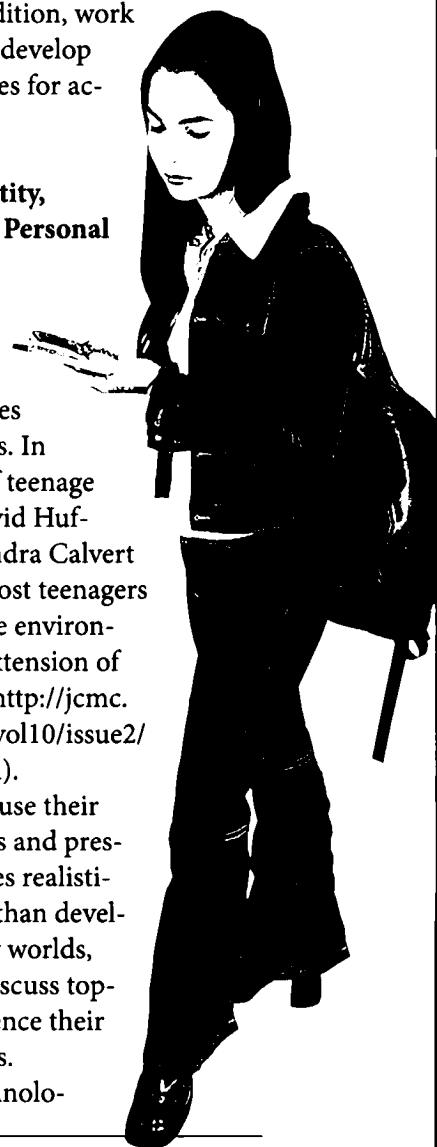
Talk to young people about their social needs and work with them to design a safe environment. Help students decide what social technology works best for their needs. For example, a student who wants to create a private journal might create a password-protected blog while a student who wants to interact with children from other countries might use a website like *epals* to locate contacts (<http://epals.com>).

If a group of friends wants a place to share their passion for *Manga* and graphic novels, help them set up a closed, moderated forum. In addition, work with them to develop their own rules for access and use.

Discuss Identity, Profiles, and Personal Information

Identity plays an important role in the lives of adolescents. In their study of teenage bloggers, David Huffaker and Sandra Calvert found that most teenagers use the online environment as an extension of their world (<http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol10/issue2/huffaker.html>). They tend to use their true identities and present themselves realistically. Rather than developing fantasy worlds, most teens discuss topics that influence their everyday lives.

Social technolo-



gies generally contain some type of personal profile that asks for users to identify themselves and provide personal information. In most cases, this information is for helping users make connections with others who share their interests and is also used for marketing purposes to recruit advertisers. However, this information can also be used by predators seeking victims.

Profiles with identifying information are a cause for concern. Sexual predators and cyberstalkers can easily deceive young people and “lurk” them into online and offline activities.

Encourage children not to share their full name, address, school, phone numbers, social security number, and other information that would show their location. If photographs are included, do not identify individuals or local places. Remind them that objects such as street signs, school logos, and local businesses can be used to identify locations. Discourage them also from using nicknames that might draw unwanted attention.

It’s easy for young people to forget about security issues, so students who want to use blogs and social networking sites should consider password-protected websites where they can restrict access.

As you talk to young people about social networking, use examples you find at websites such as *Bebo* to illustrate your concerns ([http://](http://www.bebo.com/)

www.bebo.com/). Show examples where students have provided too much information.

Stress Caution

From principals and police officers to criminals and advertising, people are mining social networks for information. Students need to be prepared and should be taught to use caution when they are online.

Students need to recognize why these websites are free. It’s all about marketing. User profiles are mined for information that website providers can use to attract new advertisers and to build campaigns geared to particular audiences. Understanding these marketing strategies is an important part of

being information literate.

Whether it’s evaluating information for a research paper or looking at

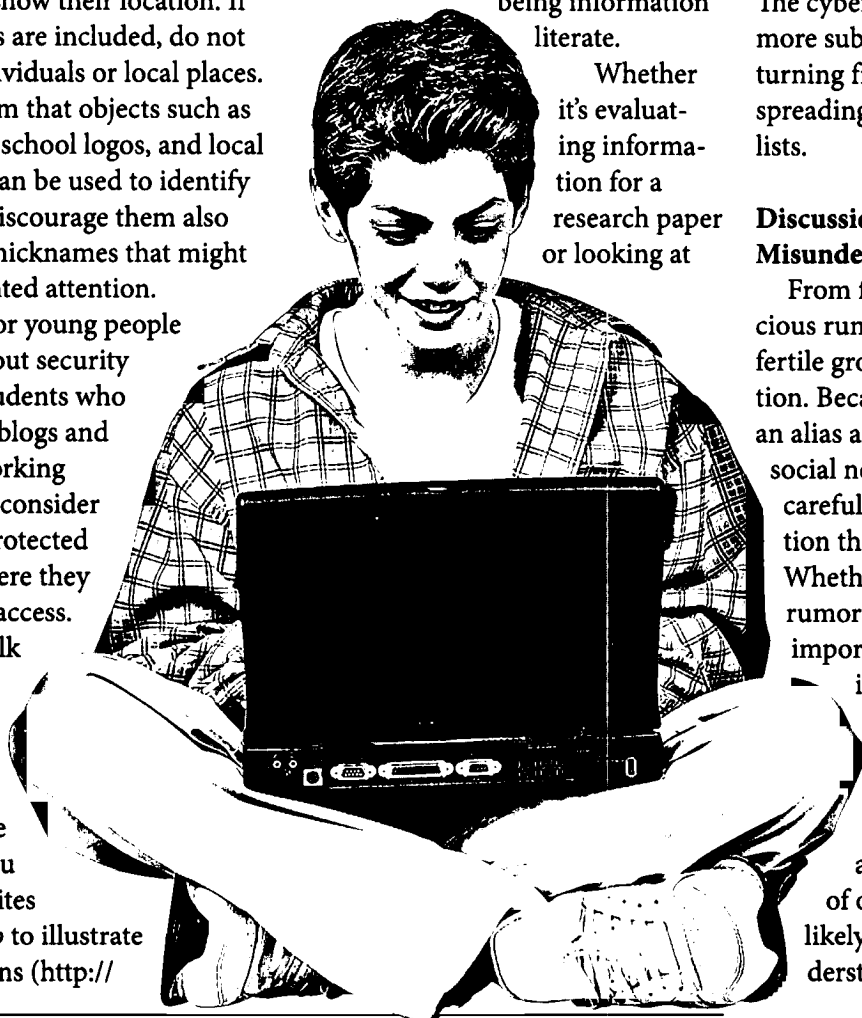
a “friend’s” profile, young people should be skeptical and scrutinize information carefully. Many children don’t consider people they’ve met online as strangers, so it’s important to emphasize the dangers of meeting someone they’ve only communicated with electronically. Particularly with younger children, consider restricting “friends” lists to people you have either met or attend your school.

Furthermore, when a child or young adult is embarrassed, harassed, humiliated, threatened, tormented, or targeted in other ways by another young person using communication technology, he or she becomes the victim of a cyberbully. The attacks may be direct through email or website postings. The cyberbully may, however, use more subtle techniques such as turning friends against friends or spreading rumors through mailing lists.

Discussion Misinformation and Misunderstandings

From fictional profiles to malicious rumors, social networks are fertile groups for misinformation. Because it’s so easy to create an alias and post information on social networks, students must carefully evaluate the information they find on these systems. Whether it is facts for a report or rumors about a friend, stress the importance of fact checking and independent verification of information.

Teenagers in any environment can experience miscommunication and the increasing volume of online communication is likely to add to these misunderstandings. Encourage stu-



dents to think before they write and remind them to be aware of who might be reading their postings. Public postings may be viewed by parents, teachers, and predators as well as potential employers. Students need to be aware of the consequences of their actions.

Young people express their ideas and feelings in emoticons and adapted language that may not be easily understood by outsiders. Students also need to know the difference between formal and informal communication. Whether it's an email message, telephone conversation, or traditional letter, they need to be able to select the appropriate language for the purpose and audience.

Address Peer Pressure

From suicide pacts to cheating, students' lives are filled with pressures. The formation of peer relationships is similar in the online and offline worlds. Discuss with students the importance of carefully selecting their friends both online and offline. Do these people share your interests and values? What do you really know about them?

Help Students Manage Time

Although young people are convinced that they can watch videos, listen to music, IM their friends, and do homework at the same time, they may be over stimulated and less productive than they think. Even though they are a generation of multitaskers, they may also experience what Linda Stone calls "continuous partial attention" (Levy 2006, 8). In other words, they try to accomplish several things at once by scanning through resources looking for the most useful information.

Revisit Acceptable Use Policies

Many school district Acceptable User Policies have not been updated since the introduction of newer social technologies. Although some districts are developing strict new guidelines that include monitoring social networking sites for "inappropriate or illegal" postings, others are stressing personal responsibility and ethical behavior.

Promote Online Safety

Use your school newsletter, website, and parent nights to share quality child safety websites with both teachers and parents (see Table 2).

Applications to Information Inquiry

According to Lee Rainie of the Internet Pew Internet & American Life Project, 87% of all youth between the ages of twelve and seventeen use the Internet (<http://www.pewinternet.org/ppt/Teens%20and%20technology.pdf>). As the first generation to grow up with interactive media, technology plays a special role in the lives of today's teens. These young people are comfortable manipulating, remixing, and sharing content. Rainie further notes that 57% of teens contribute their creations to online common areas including artwork, audio and video, photos, and creative writing (<http://www.pewinternet.org/ppt/Teens%20and%20technology.pdf>). It is, therefore, essential that the library media specialist work with students, teachers, and parents to understand the harmful as well as helpful applications of social technologies both inside and outside the school setting.

In his web article "Plug In, or

Pull the Plug," columnist Larry Magid states that "Social networks can have a number of very positive effects on a teen, including helping to increase self-esteem and provide an outlet for creativity and skill development on numerous levels"

TABLE 2 CYBERSAFETY WEBSITES Resources for Young People

Chat Danger. <http://www.chatdanger.com/>
Cybersmart. <http://www.cybersmartkids.com.au/>
Get Your Web License. <http://pbskids.org/license/>
ID the Creep. <http://www.idthecreep.com/>
IKeepSafe. <http://www.ikeepsafe.org/>
Internet SuperHeroes. <http://www.internetsuperheroes.org/>
NetSmartz. <http://www.netsmartzkids.org/>
Safe Surfing. <http://www.disney.co.uk/DisneyOnline/Safesurfing/>
StopCyberBullying. <http://www.stopcyberbullying.org/>
X-BLOCK. <http://xblock.isafe.org/>

Resources for Adults

GetNetWise. <http://kids.getnetwise.org/>
OnGuard Online. <http://www.onguardonline.gov/socialnetworking.html>
WebAware. <http://www.bewebaware.ca/english/>
Wired Safety. <http://www.wiredsafety.org/>
Yahooligans! Parents' Guide. <http://yahooligans.yahoo.com/parents/>

(http://www.msn.staysafeonline.com/getnetsafetour/experts_corner/plug_in_or_pull_the_plug.html).

The most common uses for social technology in schools relate to data collection and collaborative writing. According to David Huffaker, weblogs promote literacy through storytelling and dialogue (http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue9_6/huffaker/index.html).

Social technology fits well into a social curriculum placing emphasis on "student-talk." Danny Callison stresses that in this type of curriculum a student is immersed in a problem-solving environment where the young person must use his or her social interaction skills to communicate, negotiate, speculate, and debate (2006, 559-562). Rather than focusing on adult-talk, student-talk is valued. The library media specialist can establish virtual environments for this type of child-focused interaction.

Developing a successful online learning community involves much more than installing software on your school's Web server. The key is establishing an environment that promotes interaction, encourages responsible risk taking, and rewards collabo-

ration. Use the following ideas to build your first social technology-rich project:

- Partner with a teacher who shares your vision.
- Identify standards-based information inquiry and content-area outcomes for the project.
- Start with small, meaningful assignments that generate curiosity and sharing.
- Design interactive, collaborative projects that promote a sense of community.
- Provide both formal and informal social tools to promote in and out of class discussions.
- Invite new, outside members to participate such as a jigsaw with another class, a community expert, or outside evaluator.
- Apply authentic assessments to measure success.
- Provide the social tools and let the student lead.
- Celebrate successes.

Conclusion

You've probably played the game "Six Degrees" where you try to connect celebrities through their movies and television shows. Like this game, Internet users are only a few clicks from their online friends and knowledgeable experts, but they are also only a few clicks from cyberbullies and sexual predators. Websites like *MySpace* and *Facebook* are just the beginning of the current wave of social

technology likely to evolve over the next several years. The issue is how to help young people become informed, responsible users of these as well as new social technologies.

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