want to be my “friend”? what you need to know about social technologies

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 positive and negative applications. Although the news media is filled with scary stories about the harmful consequences of social networking software, little attention is given to the opportunities that this technology provides for 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, which allows people to easily socialize, collaborate, and share information online. Children and young adults are attracted to these highly interactive tools. Rather than simply view static web pages, they chat with friends, critique movies, and share digital photographs.

According to Lee Rainie (2006) of the Pew Internet and 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. As the first generation to grow up with interactive media, they comfortably manipulate, remix, and share content. Rainie notes that 57% of teens contribute to online common areas with creations such as artwork, audio and video, photos, and creative writing.

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

WHAT IS SOCIAL TECHNOLOGY?

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

Weblogs, wikis, forums, instant messaging, and e-mail 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 (personal digital assistants) and cell phones. Stowe Boyd (2003) identified three characteristics of social software: interaction, feedback, and connections.

INTERACTION

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

FEEDBACK

Social technology generally provides a mechanism for reacting to others in the form of guest books, comments, or reputation and rating systems. Rainie (2006) notes that, beyond friends whom they know locally, teens expect to have conversations with the creators of web content, and they want to register their critique of others’ work.

They also want their voices heard—for example, by voting on issues through online polls and by using rating services to rate reputations, such as those on eBay. Although some people applaud this activism, others are concerned about the potential negative impact of web sites such as RateMyTeachers (www.ratemyteachers.com/).

CONNECTIONS

A third mechanism of social technology is support for the creation of new relationships. For example, MySpace.com (www.myspace.com/) uses personal profiles and invitations for friends as a way of establishing new contacts. The core of social software is the ability to identify people with similar interests and needs. 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 who have 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 they seek affirmation from their friends—thus, 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 is voting on American Idol or participating in a global warming forum, they want to feel part of what is 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 seek ways to help the environment, become politically active, and build international 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. Because “everyone” is using social networks, students want to be part of the crowd. Young people see social networks as invitations to a party—as a way to meet people and keep up to date on what is happening in their world. They are concerned about missing out on something important, and they 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; they create polls on school issues; and they ask friends for help with personal problems or homework. Unfortunately, many students are unable to effectively evaluate the information that 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. Although some students experiment with drugs, others use the online environment to test ideas and share fantasies. Although 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 web sites facilitate the creation of informal and formal connections among people with similar interests to form online communities. Sometimes called “friend of a friend” sites, they are often associated with places such as MySpace.com. According to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, 2006), 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 they provide search tools to help participants identify people with similar interests based on criteria from these profiles. Although 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 people or many people.

ONE-TO-ONE

Some communications are individual-to-individual, such as e-mail, audio and video conferencing, and instant messages.

ONE-TO-MANY

Personal profiles, announcements, testimonials, web postings, forum messages, web sites, and blogs are intended for one person to communicate his or her ideas to many people. Many social networks contain digital sharing areas, including reviews, bookmarks, photos, audio, video, or other digital documents. Flickr (www.flickr.com/) is a web site where people share their digital photographs. Delicious (http://del.icio.us/) is a social bookmarking web site designed to help people store and share their favorite web sites. MyWeb2.0 from Yahoo! also provides shared bookmarks.

MANY-TO-MANY

Collaborative software such as wikis is used to build projects where many people can share their ideas in creating a joint project, such as Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia (www.wikipedia.org). Polls, surveys, rating systems, and other data collection tools are also a way for many people to cooperate. Data from remote sites might be used to gain an 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, many are finding that, rather than conflict with people’s community ties, social networks fit seamlessly with other types of communication. These social networks allow people to maintain contact with family and friends who are geographically dispersed. In addition, social technologies allow people to find support networks for a 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.com, do not allow young people under the age of 14 to join. However, it is common for underage children to lie about their ages to participate. Because of the novelty of MySpace.com, many teens are seeking lesser-known web sites with fewer regulations.

ADULTS

The biggest online social network is MySpace.com. Other social networking web sites include Friendster (www.friendster.com/), MSN Spaces (http://spaces.msn.com/), Orkut (www.orkut.com/), and Yahoo360 (http://360.yahoo.com/). Some social networks are designed for photo sharing, such as Flickr (www.flickr.com/), Slide (www.slide.com/), and Zorpia (www.zorpia.com/). There is a growing number of special-interest communities, such as BlackPlanet (www.blackplanet.com/) and MiGente (www.migente.com/). Classmates (www.classmates.com), Reunion (www.reunion.com), and MyFamily (www.myfamily.com) focus on making connections among families and friends.

Media-rich communities such as YouTube (http://youtube.com), Multiple (http://multiple.com), and Buzznet (www.buzznet.com/) emphasize audio, video, and photos, and FriendsOfEnemies (www.friendsorenemies.com/) emphasizes music.

HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

Although many high school students use adult resources, some web sites are designed specifically for young people. Bebo (www.bebo.com/), My Yearbook (www.myyearbook.com/), and Facebook (www.facebook.com/) were designed for high school and college students. Sconex (www.sconex.com/) bills itself as the unof-
Several web sites are designed for younger children. However, two subscription services are being developed for children 8 to 14 years-old: Imbee (www.imbee.com/) and Thinktonize (www.thinktonize.com/), from the producers of NetTrekker (www.nettrekker.com/). For a long list of social networks, go to Wikipedia's “List of Social Networking Web Sites” (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_social_networking_websites).

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

HOW DO SOCIAL NETWORKS AFFECT THE SCHOOL LIBRARY PROGRAM?

Social networks are something that educators cannot ignore. They have become part of the culture of young people. Information Power: Building Partnerships for Learning (American Association of School Librarians & Association for Educational Communications and Technology, 1998) 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 (2006) is a distance learning librarian at Norwich University in Northfield, VT. In her blog (http://meredith.wolfwater.com/wordpress/index.php), 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 the 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 are still having a hard time relating to the allure of social technologies, try a specialized network. For example, have some fun with LibraryThing (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: Eduscapes (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 (instant message) their friends, and do homework at the same time, they may be overstimulated and less productive than they think. Although they form a generation of multitaskers, they also experience, in the words of Linda Stone (quoted in Levy, 2006), continuous partial attention. In other words, they try to accomplish several things at once by scanning through resources looking for the most useful information, which 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 is discussing the threat of cyberbullies or talking about misinformation at social networking web sites, it is 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 who are accessing social networking sites, lawmakers have introduced legislation that would require schools and public libraries to block commercial web sites with features such as blogs, chats, messaging services, and other interactive elements. This enactment would expand the current Children's Internet Protection Act (www.fcc.gov/cgb/consumerfacts/cipa.html), which requires filtering software. However, filters and blocks will not prevent your students from finding a backdoor into social networks. Make students aware of the dangers, and use the following online resources for added information about online safety:

NetSmartz (www.netsmartzkids.org/)
GetNetWise (http://kids.getnetwise.org/)
Wired Safety (www.wiredsafety.org/)

REFERENCES


Annette Lamb and Larry Johnson teach at the School of Library and Information Science at Indiana University, Indianapolis, as part of the Teacher of School Library Media Leadership Online Blue Ribbon Certification program, available to educators around the world (http://eduscapes.com/blueribbon/). Visit http://annettelamb.com/ for more exciting teaching ideas.
our columnists

Rachelle Lasky Bilz: Head librarian, Lake Ridge Academy, North Ridgeville, OH; author of *Life Is Tough: Guys, Growing Up, and Young Adult Literature*. bilzr@lakeridgeacademy.org

Barbara Braxton: Teacher-librarian, Palmerston District Primary School, Palmerston, Australian Capital Territory. barbara@iimetro.com.au

Sharon Coatey: Acquisitions editor for School Library Media and Libraries Unlimited and a past president of the American Association of School Librarians. sharone4@starband.net

Reid Goldsborough: Author of *Straight Talk About the Information Superhighway*. reidgold@netaxis.com, http://members.home.net/reidgold

Michele Gorman: Teen services manager of Charlotte and Mecklenberg County’s ImaginOn, Charlotte, NC, and author of *Getting Graphic! Using Graphic Novels to Promote Literacy With Preteens and Teens*. comixlibrarian@aol.com, www.imaginon.org

Holly Gunn: Teacher-librarian, Halifax Regional School Board, Dartmouth, NS. hgunn@accessable.net

Sara Catherine Howard: Adjunct instructor, Department of Library Science, Sam Houston State University, Huntsville, TX. lis_sch@shsu.edu

Larry Johnson: Professor, School of Library and Information Science, Indiana University–Purdue University, Indianapolis, IN. ljjohnson@mail.escapes.com

Annette Lamb: Professor, School of Library and Information Science, Indiana University–Purdue University, Indianapolis, IN. alamb@eduscapes.com

Teri S. Lesesne: Assistant professor, Department of Library Science, Sam Houston State University, Huntsville, TX. lis_tsl@shsu.edu

David Loertscher: Professor, School of Library and Information Science, San Jose State University, San Jose, CA; president of Hi Willow Research and Publishing; and past president of the American Association of School Librarians. dloertscher@teacherlibrarian.com

Keith McPherson: Lecturer and coordinator, Language and Literacy Education Research Centre, University of British Columbia, Vancouver. keith.mcpherson@ubc.ca

Kate Houston Mitchoff: School corps librarian, Multnomah County Library, Portland, OR. kateho@yahoo.com

Kathleen Odean: Librarian, speaker, and author of *Great Books for Girls* (revised 2002) and other guides. Rhode Island. kathleenoedan@hotmail.com, www.kathleenoedan.com


Esther Rosenfeld: Educational and school library consultant; former coordinator of libraries for Toronto District School Board; and past president of the Ontario School Library Association, 2002 and 2003. erosenfeld@teacherlibrarian.com

Joanne Troutner: Director of media/technology, Tippecanoe School Corp, and owner of Creative Computer Enterprises, Lafayette, IN. troutner@mindspring.com, www.jttroutner.com

Robert D. Wilson: Director and head teacher, Moccasin Community Day School, Groveland, CA. coltrane@lodalink.com, www.simplyhaiku.com

Betty Winslow: Media center director, Bowling Green Christian Academy, Bowling Green, OH. freelancer@wcnet.org

66 | TEACHER LIBRARIAN 34:1

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.