

Multimedia and Internet @ Schools

Pipeline Column:

Due: Nov. 10, 2006 (Jan./Feb. 2006 issue)

Justifying the Social Tools: Improving the Conversation

Educators have long been harvesting ideas from popular culture to imbue excitement into lessons and engage learners. It's truly the definition of the teachable moment when we take engaging current events like elections, hurricanes, earthquakes, war or local events to teach the knowledge acquisition and thinking skills that our learners will need when they become adults and earners. The current crop of social networking sites has generated both excitement and concern. Some schools have banned them entirely. In my view this is over the top and damages the teach librarian's key roles in preparing learners to research well. You should see the plaintive notes I get from high school students on my blog asking how to get to MySpace etc. and what are the latest workarounds. Sometimes it's normal sites being blocked like the local newspaper! If you're a regular reader of this column, you know I am a big supporter of teacher-librarians teaching internet safety skills. I am incredulous at the number of schools and boards who block access to much of the web and Internet. How can people teach essential contemporary skills without the most modern tools? This to me is like teaching traffic safety by banning roads to Kindergarteners. How does one learn about how to use something effectively and safely without being to see and experience actual examples and websites? How do you learn to identify sites that lie to you without ever seeing the execrable Stormfront site on Martin Luther King (<http://www.martinlutherking.org/>)? How do you show the difference between satire (The Onion) and lies? Are there whales in rivers? Ask Google and see. (<http://www.nytimes.com/library/tech/99/03/circuits/articles/04trut.html>) The overuse or too aggressive implementation of blocking and filtering software is damaging kid's education and growth.

It seems that this is a normal progression in the adoption of new ways. We even have a word for it, Ludditism, after those who fought the Industrial Revolution. People tried to ban rock & roll, women wearing pants, and even the novel format for young people as societal changes moved on inexorably. Fear and misinformation should not triumph over logic and an agenda for learning.

In the past, we've used contests, treasure hunts, quizzes, creative works, and more to make the lessons interesting and fun. We know that play is one of the most fundamental ways in which we learn. The Internet has provided us with many new ways to provide learners to with an environment that allows them to learn through discovery, play, and collaboration and just plain having fun. If we make that discovery and play process too conscribed then we make it too artificial.

The YALSA (Young Adult Library Services Association) division of ALA has a blog called YALSA Blog (<http://blogs.ala.org/yalsa.php>). For much of October 2006 they were running a thread called "Positive Uses of Social Networking Software". They came up with an even 30 tips. I thought I would list the headings for you here and refer you to the final PDF document they created titled: "Social Networking and DOPA."

1. del.icio.us
2. LibraryThing
3. Digg
4. Flicktion
5. Blogging
6. It can be done in the library
7. MySpace Bulletins
8. Empowerment
9. Planning
10. Reading and Writing
11. Building a community around gaming
12. Photo Sharing
13. Second Life
14. YouTube
15. Collaboration
16. SingShot
17. Networking with authors
18. Youth participation
19. Collaborating at school
20. Educating parents in the library
21. Personalization
22. Copyright
23. Innovation
24. Learning by themselves
25. Freedom to choose
26. ResultR
27. Communicating with parents and other stakeholders
28. Raising awareness
29. College search
30. Flock

I love the list just because there were even a few things that I didn't know about on it! Anyway, it's a rational and well thought through explanation of the benefits of social networking sites and tools. With it you can be better armed to discuss these sites with those who need this information to make better informed decisions for their children, students and themselves. You can even give them a copy on paper or PDF email attachment..

Their conclusion is worthy of repeating. The full document summarizes a number of positive factors in allowing teens to use social networking sites. The highlights were that social networking software can:

- “Empower teens
- Give teens the chance to meaningfully serve the community
- Support teen reading and writing/text-based literacy needs and skills
- Give teens opportunities to create and collaborate
- Make sure teens are able to plan and manage projects
- Communicate with community members
- Provide teens with opportunities to choose how to be smart and safe when using technology.”

Any or all of these are worthy consequences of using social software in an educational setting. Those who choose to block, or attempt to block like the proposed DOPA legislation, are choosing to not take advantage of these benefits in a modern context. Those folks who choose to block social networking sites for good reasons should be made to make those reasons explicit and prove how their approach encourages good learning results and doesn't overreach. I've seen too many instant messaging sites banned on vague and unsupportable reasons of viruses and stalkers. It is time to have an informed conversation about social networking and education. To do otherwise is to ensure our schools produce students who have to learn about how to use these in an underground kind of way or to create a student who is not prepared for global competition with students who are ready for the fully connected world of the future. We don't want that. Congratulations to ALA and YALSA for building this document.

If we're not for libraries and our role in education, then who will be?

Stephen Abram, MLS is Vice President, Innovation, for SirsiDynix, Chief Strategist of the SirsiDynix Institute and the President-elect of SLA. He is an SLA Fellow and the past president of the Ontario Library Association and the immediate past president of the Canadian Library Association. Stephen would love to hear from you at stephen.abram@sirsidynix.com.