

## **Multimedia and Internet @ Schools**

Pipeline Column:

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### **Shooting Themselves in the Foot**

So, *TIME* Magazine declared **you** as the person of the year. Give yourself a pat on the back. Besides applying millions of Mylar mirrors to the cover of Time, they received an enormous ripple effect press attention from the choice and highlighted the movement of the social networking tools and sites into the mainstream.

Unfortunately, "You" does not cover enough students and teachers while they remain in our schools and school libraries. Oh yes, they're using the tools all right, they're just raising themselves. Too many boards and schools have chosen to bury their ostrich heads in the sand and neglect their educational mandate in favor of teaching skills in the context of an internet empowered world.

Chris Harris of the Infomancy blog (<http://schoolof.info/infomancy/>) makes the excellent point that *TIME* Magazine's selection of "you" (us, we, me, them) as their "Person of the Year" excludes too many of our K-12 schools, teachers and students. He states:

#### **Time Didn't Mean "Me"**

"When it comes to 'me' as a professional, the place where I spend the majority of my waking hours is rather not 'we.' Or, perhaps it is a bit too 'we' - but the 'we' that schools have created to mean 'us in the corner twiddling our thumbs and pretending that the Internet doesn't exist.' See, for me, Facebook is forbidden. Second Life is shut down. Amazon reviews are avoided. Podcasts are against policy. Blogs are...well...banned just might not be strong enough of a word. The word that springs to mind is demonized. So how, then, could TIME possibly have meant 'me' when they named 'you' as the person of the year?" [Infomancy]

In my travels, I hear this all the time from teachers, administrators, librarians, media specialists, even students. They often don't know the actual name of the person who made the decision to block access. There are local urban legends about specific incidents but no real evidence. Many find nothing more than ignorance, fear and loathing if they dig deeper to find out more about the policy, if there is one. Sometimes they just find that it just happens, with no real forethought at all. Often faceless "parents", nameless special interest lobby groups, or opaque board policies and unclear local, federal or state rules are blamed with nothing more than a shoulder shrug. Generally, there seems to be a wall of resistance to actually standing up with facts and showing a well-informed

policy. It appears to some that the opacity is a defense against poor policy and damaging pedagogy.

Much of the time draconian policies and implementations are getting in the way of actual education. Sometimes they are driving the use of web resources underground where kids are forced to learn about it on the street. Sound familiar?

It seems that this is a common path of change when new forms of knowledge and tools arrive. The Luddites aggressively damaged textile machines that threatened their way of life in the early 1800's. When novels were first promulgated there were attempts to ban their use by young people, since they would damage their young minds. I was not allowed to use ballpoint pens in school since real businessmen [sic] used pen and ink or more modernly, fountain pens! We have experienced the same debate about using calculators in math classes. Progress has been delayed by the early changes wrought by automobiles over horse and buggy. Since germs could not be seen, many people died during the Black Death until proper sanitation, cleanliness procedures and sewers could be encouraged. Long after the educated world knew that the earth was round; Galileo was jailed and threatened with death for challenging the status quo of common knowledge.

Resistance to change and renewal seem to follow a common path. Technology shifts and an ever-evolving society are a constant. In the world of education, however, the best path is to start by asking ourselves a simple question: "What will their world look like?" What will the future be like and what skills, awareness and aptitude will our students need to be successful and safe in the future? It's pretty clear that the Internet and the web will play huge roles in their future in ways we haven't even imagined yet. By building a Chinese Great Wall around the school, are we abandoning our duty to teach? Prepare? Involve? Are we ignoring the future to protect the past? In the days before automobiles, we rarely taught road safety. When roads, traffic lights, cars, and trucks multiplied we had to teach road safety at a very young age, or our children were imperiled. Banning most internet and web applications and sites in schools is the equivalent of trying to teach road safety by banning roads, cars and trucks in school and then sending the kids into the streets to play. It just seems to be an unsupportable policy to me in the context of our mission with learners.

Now, if we did open up as much of the Internet as is possible and rational, what would be the benefits?

### **Teachable Moments**

The Internet and the web offer an infinite world for teachers to prepare learners for the world they will encounter. Here are just a few moments that can be created there.

1. Most Internet transactions require you to identify yourself. Identity management and being aware of the long term effects of your profiles on websites, your personal information, your 'numbers' and passwords are all key skills required by the future economy. We already hear far too many stories about people of all ages being scammed through identity theft and confidence schemes. Children must be taught careful management of their identity early.
2. Many schools now offer programs in promoting self esteem and anti-bullying. This playground problem can and has moved to the web. Playground programs and whole school policies are not enough. Schools need to build on their anti-bullying successes in this new sphere. Ignoring it or banning it means you're part of the problem.
3. E-mail etiquette and writing are core skills in today's enterprise. It's a common tale that students come into the workplace with writing skills for literary long forms but inadequate e-mail, short message and blog writing skills. Avoiding the issue doesn't prepare learners for the communication needs of a world beyond reports and letters.
4. IM or instant messaging is the communication mode of choice for many industries and sectors. Banning it totally in schools seems Luddite-like and prepares no one for a world of hyper-conversations.
5. Talking without boundaries of expense and geography is the promise of Skype and other VOIP communication technologies. It's an international, multi-cultural world. These technologies allow us to broaden the experience of all learners.
6. Learners do not learn how to identify the wheat from the chaff if both are not present. Silly legislative efforts like CIPA and DOPA merely place U.S. students at a disadvantage to their international counterparts and competition. Students need to be introduced slowly to making evaluation decisions about good and bad, quality and trash. Asking some of them to land at the college and university unfiltered environment, after a coddled and filtered school networked environment is unfair. I think it's unethical.
7. I am not a fan of bans on Cel phones. Schools need to have rules about cel phone use but an outright ban just makes schools look foolish. It's a giant game of Whack-a-Mole. As the phone becomes the dominant web access device over the coming years, the attempts at filtering, controlling, and will look pathetically naive to future eyes. Students must be prepared for the coming technology environment.
8. Calculators are everywhere now. If they're on every phone, iPod, MP3 player and PC/laptop, what's the point in banning them? Using them appropriately is the teaching needed now. Who does square roots by hand any more anyway?
9. Bebo was Google's top search term of 2006. Social networking environments like MySpace and Facebook are dominant in the way the social we is moving.

10. Gaming has been a proven learning method that covers a wide variety of learning styles. The research and experience of using gaming in teaching, military and research worlds is pretty interesting. It can't be ignored.
11. Stalker awareness - bad guys on the Internet - is the new Millennium's "street proofing". If we want our kids to be safe, we have must teach them strategies to identify and avoid the bad guys. Much like we have sex education because the punishment for sex shouldn't be HIV/AIDS. The punishment for Internet naiveté should not be assault or worse. We can't blame the victim either.
12. Viruses, phishing, scams, Spam, Spim, Splogs, blog spam. Lions and tigers and bears – oh my. This is the reality of today's technologically enhanced world. Our world depends on people having better skills for avoiding these threats. Safety starts in school, unless of course, we aren't teaching it.

### **Three Strategies to Encourage Informed Debate**

Clearly, we are in an era where we have a generation of learners, who are primarily learning about how to use the major Internet-based tools of their future on their own. They need to be lead and trained to a higher level by their educators, who may or may not have the skills, technology and resources to do so - yet. Catch 22. What do we do? I suggest that we take a three-pronged attack:

1. First bring **parents** on side – educate them. They are starving for leadership on this issue. I am not suggesting opportunistic little Home & School or PTA sessions. I mean a full blown program. This is too important to leave to serendipitous adoption and understanding. Trusted schools and libraries are in a perfect position to train the parents as well as to position the good and bad aspects of the Web. Don't wait for national or state leadership, start now.
2. Bring the **Educrats** on side. Too many educational administrators are taking the easy road by engaging in power strategies – block, ban, regulate, etc. Empower them to communicate with their community audiences of teachers, parent, employers and the general public. When there is a vacuum, misinformation seems to fill it. Fill it yourself and informed debate and decisions will ensue. Maybe not the first time, but eventually.
3. Bring the **IT** folks on side. IT has a huge challenge – keeping the pipes up and running - on budget - in world of viruses and bandwidth challenges isn't easy. However, that's not why your institution exists. It's just the information architecture that's there to achieve your mission – creating an educated and talented generation. Therefore, set up an environment where IT cooperates and understands the curriculum needs. You then have a framework whereby they must justify their actions in the context of

overall learning needs and you can partner with them to get the additional resources you both need to succeed in your organization's mission.

So, I don't believe that it is an option to not teach information fluency and Internet safety in a world where the real world can be at their fingertips. Draconian Dark Ages strategies of preventing kids from using the web and other new tech technologies can only serve to drive kids' use of the web underground. That's not good. By making the dark side of the web 'cool' and by not striving to ensure that our future citizens have the skills necessary to succeed in an increasingly electronic knowledge economy we actually create a two-pronged strategy for failure. I can't abide that. So, let's increase our capacity to deliver the knowledge economy information fluency, networking and research skills across the curriculum in a whole school / whole community manner. We can develop the courses collaboratively; we can create these at a higher level than locally and use the school infrastructure of IT, teachers and librarians to empower the learning. Yes, the Refuseniks identified by the Pew Internet and American Life Project will achieve some prominence in the short term, but those of us who strive to create the next generation of citizens for the new Millennium will not abdicate our responsibility to do so. The punishment for lack of full Internet safety training should not be economic poverty and decreased international competitiveness.

Ancient Asian wisdom states that, in the battle of the river with the rock, the river wins.

***Be the river, not the rock.***

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