

## **Multimedia and Internet @ Schools**

Pipeline Column:

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### **Scaffolding the New Social Literacies**

by Stephen Abram

OMG – reading literacy and numeracy, civic literacy and all the rest. Now we're hearing that schools must expand the teaching of information literacy, computer literacy, media literacy, critical literacy, health literacy, technacy and transliteracy. And, do it all across the curricula. Dozens of types of literacy are discussed on websites and Wikipedia. How can we possibly keep up with another one!? Sometimes it seems that getting everyone through the 3 R's is challenging enough.

So, despite encouraging some slings and arrows, this issue I want to highlight an emerging, important new literacy – online social literacy.

Both Facebook and MySpace restrict their social networking sites to people over the age of 14. They remove people regularly for being underage and have removed tens of thousands of people for bad behaviour or being registered sex offenders. The chief security officers are serious about trying to make these sites 'safe'. However, for all intents and purposes they are only as safe as the user has the awareness and skills to make good judgments. Because people think that social networking sites are restricted to teens and up, some people think that social networking literacy is a subject for teens – junior and high school.

Not so.

Have you seen **Webkinz**? [<http://www.webkinz.com/>] From the website (hosted by Ganz® plush animal people), Webkinz pets are lovable plush pets that each come with a unique Secret Code. With it, you enter Webkinz World where you care for your virtual pet, answer trivia, earn KinzCash, and play the best kids games on the net!" They hotter than Beanies were with kids today.

How about **Club Penguin**? [<http://www.clubpenguin.com/>] Their website says that "Club Penguin is a safe virtual world for kids to play, interact with friends and have fun letting their imaginations soar." It is already one of the top ten social networking sites online. Note this December 2007 chart of the top social networks in the U.S. (Penetration is higher in Canada and some other countries.)

Market Share of U.S. Internet Visits to Top 10 Social Networking Websites					
Rank	Name	Domain	Dec-07	Dec-06	YoY % Change
1	MySpace	www.myspace.com	72.32%	78.89%	-8%
2	Facebook	www.facebook.com	16.03%	10.59%	51%
3	Bebo	www.bebo.com	1.09%	0.99%	10%
4	BlackPlanet.com	www.blackplanet.com	1.04%	0.96%	8%
5	Club Penguin	www.clubpenguin.com	0.80%	0.54%	48%
6	Gaiaonline.com	www.gaiaonline.com	0.76%	0.58%	31%
7	myYearbook	www.myyearbook.com	0.73%	0.14%	407%
8	hi5	www.hi5.com	0.63%	0.64%	-1%
9	Classmates	www.classmates.com	0.55%	0.58%	-7%
10	Yahoo! 360	360.yahoo.com	0.54%	0.91%	-40%
<p>Note - data is based on a custom category of 53 of the leading social networking websites ranked by market share of U.S. visits, which is the percentage of online traffic to the domain or category, from the Hitwise sample of 10 million U.S. Internet users. Hitwise measures more than 1 million unique websites on a daily basis, including sub-domains of larger websites. Hitwise categorizes websites into industries on the basis of subject matter and content, as well as market orientation and competitive context.</p>					
<b>Source: Hitwise</b>					

[<http://image.exct.net/members/34732/SocialNets-Dec2007.doc>]

According to Hitwise, for December 2007, MySpace.com received 72 percent of U.S. visits among the social networking category. Facebook.com received 12.57 percent of visits and Bebo.com received 1.09 percent of visits. U.S. traffic to all the social networking websites increased four percent year-over-year.

MyYearbook experienced the largest gain in market share in December 2007, increasing 407 percent compared to December of the previous year. Facebook and Club Penguin followed, increasing 51 and 48 percent, respectively.

I've seen parents fall over backwards getting their kids online and into these spaces. Indeed, kids' social sites seem to be doing quite well with Club Penguin in the top 5 for market share, traffic from new and returning visitors, and time spent per user. It is clearly delivering an experience kids like.

What are these two sites doing? Isn't it obvious? They're using the Colombian strategy. These sites are, probably unintentionally, playground pushers of social networking crack. They try for brand loyalty and return visits. Unlike MySpace or Facebook they have subscription models or you need to buy something to enter. Peer pressure plays no small role in their word-of-mouth marketing.

By creating safe places where you need letters from your teacher to get online, or protecting kids by narrowing the rules, can kids ever develop the critical thinking about their identity and privacy that will be essential for success in their future? Ethical companies like Club Penguin publish their privacy policies and have parent sections and make it easy to access questions. Still, there are lots of sites out there now collecting behavioural and personal information on kids and beyond. Kids and their parents should know how to make good choices. E-mail and phishing scams are just the top of the iceberg of the huge industry targeting everyone for their personal gain.

Nothing is gained by pointing to some learner at any age and saying they don't know 'X'. This applies to criticism of the different way kids handle their own

personal information. My point in this issue's column is that we do need to start earlier on teaching privacy and adept handling of personal information. We ignore it at our peril and this is a great opportunity for teacher-librarians to shine on a whole school or PTA basis.

Here's one idea. We teach about ourselves and our communities and the world in scaffolds from K to 8. This is the perfect way to build awareness of your identity information in the curriculum. We start young as kids learn about themselves – their name, their height, their weight and other personal information. Quickly we start talking about the nuclear family and start family tree projects as we expand it to include the extended family in the next grade. It is always exciting to see their budding awareness of their neighbourhood as we introduce maps and models of their homes in relation to their overall community. You know the drill. It moves on to states and countries and international/global until they have a solid grounding in their own place in the world and the different facets with which they interact with it.

So here's my idea. At each stage we define what level of awareness they need to have online for each of these stages. What would we tell others about ourselves in our family? What information would you e-mail grandma vs. a stranger? Do you share more or different things when you're out in your own neighbourhood? What about strange neighbourhoods? When do you tell people your whole name and address? What about when you're interacting with the whole country or potentially the world, like on the web? See what I mean? I think it's possible to retrofit learners with the skills they need to be aware of their personal identity information and the risks out there without scaring them but providing age and stage sensitive context for success in these emerging and important new electronic environments.

Those schools that block social sites rather than taking advantage of a teachable moment are missing something. The kids aren't, they'll just take it underground. I have seen too many schools using over the top scare tactics such as bringing in police speakers telling horror stories. Smart schools will offer more balanced viewpoints and information. Our society expects it.

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