



Adapting Social Networking

TO ADDRESS 21ST-CENTURY SKILLS

BY TIM DISCIPIO

From using Twitter to encourage short story writing to utilizing Delicious to organize professional development tips and favorite articles, the number of social networking tools and websites is increasing exponentially. We know educators use these 21st-century tools with students in all grade levels. The question remains, however, whether and how these tools might be used to positively affect student understanding and achievement.

The short answer is yes, most definitely, though there are essential innovations in pedagogy that must accompany them. The long answer is that these tools, when chosen thoughtfully, implemented appropriately, and combined with innovative pedagogy through internet-connected communities, can teach students the skills necessary to thrive in the 21st century and expand their ability to communicate and collaborate in a global marketplace.

Consider the following questions:

- How are you preparing your students for working in a global marketplace (i.e., innovation, critical thinking, problem solving, global awareness, and self-direction)?
- How are you using technology to build collaborative skills and creativity among your students?
- How are you creating global digital citizens?
- How are you building learning experiences that connect learning to “real life” and encourage independent exploration?
- How can you teach 21st-century skills in economically disadvantaged communities?

These questions help begin a discussion about which tools to examine and why, what tools best fulfill the needs of each school and district’s environment, and what kind of curriculum-based activities can be enhanced through use of social networking tools. There are many tools available. The key is to incorporate a holistic approach—weaving a combination of tools throughout the curriculum and across the pedagogy.

A 2007 study showed that teens in the U.S. spent more than 40% of their media time on cell phones, the internet, and playing games, yet the majority of students are “disconnected” while at school. In addition to texting on their cell phones and using instant messaging while online, stu-

dents are leveraging personal social networking sites, such as Club Penguin, MySpace, and Facebook, to connect and communicate with their peers before and after school. It is clear that today’s generation of media-savvy students know how to use these tools for communicating, but are they really using the technology to its fullest potential?

SOCIAL LEARNING NETWORKS

As educators, it is our responsibility to take students from what they already know to the next level of critical thinking. In other words, today’s students are using these tools to connect, but are they creating enough, collaborating on projects, or inventing new ideas? Students need guidance, and here is where we can best use practiced methodologies of teaching to our advantage. What needs to be incorporated across the curriculum is a social learning network—if we focus only on the “social” and “network,” we are missing the mark. A true social learning network incorporates innovative pedagogy through internet-connected communities, digital resources, and a series of Web 2.0 tools that empower students to master the curriculum and to learn issues beyond the classroom.

On an individual level, social networking tools can be used in specific assignments, such as using email to correspond with classmates about a history project or blogging about a science experiment. Here, students are learning to utilize the technology to accomplish a particular task. What should be encouraged is the next level of communication—collaboration. Within a social learning network, students can collaborate using tools such as email, blogs, and wikis to create, invent, and showcase their work in a way that unlocks intrinsic motivation and advances learning outcomes.

One of the most critical skills students need to learn prior to graduation is the ability to collaborate. Traditional pedagogy calls for students to learn on an individual level and be tested on an individual level. These skills are important and the majority of employers still consider reading and mathematical competencies as key differentiating factors in hiring. Yet, research through the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics indicates as many as 70% of the new jobs recently created in the U.S. are positions that require interactions between people and involve judgment, insight, and collaboration.

The Partnership for 21st Century Skills, an organization founded in 2002, built a framework for educational institutions outlining the skills necessary for students to succeed during school and postgraduation. The framework begins with a basic understanding of core subjects (i.e., math, science, history), with key 21st-century themes woven throughout the curriculum, such as global awareness and health literacy. From there, the framework suggests three overarching student outcomes, including life and career skills; learning and innovation skills; and information, media, and technology skills. Ultimately, the Partnership is advocating for educators and students to consider the implication of skills beyond the basic subject areas that are critical to success in the 21st century.

Incorporating a true social learning network with pedagogy embedded can serve as a support system for 21st-century learning. Using this environment, projects based on specific subject areas can address a number of skills recommended by the framework designed by the Partnership as well as by multiple state standards and the newly revised NETS-S from ISTE.

THE AMERICAN FILM HISTORY PROJECT

Demonstrating how a social network for learning can address a number of the skills recommended by the Partnership, Martha Barnes from Columbia Elementary School in Annandale, Va., has developed an activity for her students called the American Film History Project. Helping her students to improve their information, media, and technology skills as well as inspiring creativity and innovation, Barnes plans to launch the program for the 2008–2009 school year. Bringing together several schools from around the U.S. to participate, the program will involve high school students helping to teach video and editing skills to her elementary students.

Leveraging ePals, Inc.'s free, online email service for K–12 (see the ePals global community of classrooms at www.epals.com) and videoconferencing tools, she is incorporating social networking tools within a safe and constructive environment to promote mentoring and the use of media skills to engage her students in learning about history. Giving her students the opportunity to communicate and collaborate with their peers from other schools, as well as older students, helps to broaden their points of view and teaches them different ways to approach and solve problems.

In addition to providing opportunities for collaboration and teaching 21st-century skills, another aspect of a social learning network is the potential to build global awareness among students. Educators can choose to utilize Web 2.0 tools and other online programs, some of which are available at no cost, to match students with other students around the world. Enhancing social and cross-cultural skills, communicating and collaborating with their peers on a worldwide level helps to transition students into digital citizens, ultimately preparing them for working in a global marketplace.

GLOBAL COALITION

Building global awareness and increasing cultural literacy, Mike Casey, a teacher at Gallon Jug Community School in Belize, is part of Global Coalition, a project developed by Bill Reilly, an educator from Bethlehem School District in New York. His students take part in a global newscast, featuring students from the U.S., Japan, Russia, Belize, and several other countries. His students communicate with their peers through the same ePals online email service mentioned above and also utilize videoconferencing tools to discuss issues of global importance, including a mahogany reforestation project his class is spearheading in the Belize rainforest.

Enhancing social studies and English lessons, Casey's students have been able to learn about other cultures from Argentina to Australia, and communicate with them using Web 2.0 technologies (the ePals service has a language translator, helping students to communicate regularly and across cultures). Casey reported that the internet and computers are relatively new to their school—they gained access to the internet in October 2006. The introduction of an online social network for learning enabled their students to enter “into a world without borders, where students from all races, cultures and scholastic settings could learn together through productive and educational exchanges.”

Participating in this program and being able to teach his students how to use technology and online tools to implement a project helps build their media literacy skills as well as leadership and responsibility skills, ultimately helping to prepare them for success in the 21st century.

The key to 21st-century learning comes from the combination of innovative pedagogy and a global community with the networking tools that students are using outside the classroom. These tools may seem foreign at first, but most educators quickly find using them to be effective for creating meaningful learning experiences.

The first step is to examine the needs of each student, narrowing down which combination of tools would be best with the curriculum and pedagogy for the class. Consider what tools, when implemented together in a holistic and thoughtful manner, can encourage collaboration, spark creativity, teach 21st-century skills, and address the needs and challenges of different socioeconomic environments. In addition, consider how social networking tools can help broaden students' perspectives and cultural awareness. And, discuss with colleagues how best to prepare students for working in an increasingly global marketplace. There is more to this than students just communicating with their peers. Educators can give students real, authentic learning experiences through participating in a social learning network.

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