

# Schools and social networking: Fear or education

Cecilie Murray

**Cecilie Murray explores the opportunities offered to learning by social networking. While considering classroom applications, Cecilie considers ways to ensure a safe environment for our students.**

Social networking has transformed the way we communicate and share information with one another in today's society. Social networking uses software to build online social networks for communities of people who share interests and activities. Social networking is providing new opportunities for personal expression, the creation of interest communities, collaboration and sharing. It is growing in popularity amongst young people and has increasing interest from the business sector as a way of marketing and collaboration. But what about schools? We know that students spend more time with technology outside the classroom, so how can schools cope with this new phenomenon – though fear or education?

## What is social networking?

Most social networking sites are web-based and provide a collection of ways to communicate. Examples include:

- blogs (personal web-based journals)
- messaging (instant web-based messaging)
- chat (real time text-based interaction)
- discussion groups (delayed text-based interaction)
- wikis (modifiable collaborative web pages)
- podcasting (subscription-based broadcast over the web)
- vodcasting (video podcasts broadcast over the web)

These technologies are supported by RSS (really simple syndication) that enables the sharing of news across the web. Subscription involves signing up with your email address and a password, and it's free. Popular sites with young people include MySpace, Facebook, YouTube and Bebo. Popular sites for teachers include TeacherTube, Classroom 2.0 and Ning which provide an online space for teachers to collaborate and share teaching practice, ideas and resources.

Business social networks include LinkedIn, Skype, Plaxo Plus and Facebook which is used

increasingly by business people to connect with each other, to collaborate and to maximise business investment. Some banks and corporations have Facebook sites that enable clients to access resources. Since 2006, a Canadian bank has launched 'Split It' to assist flatmates to manage bills, and the Australian business PeerMint launched a Facebook site to facilitate loans between individuals without banks. Some of the largest networks on Facebook are now owned by Telstra, UK Civil Service, Intel and Teach America. In Australia, there are more than 2 million people with Facebook sites.

MySpace, Facebook and Bebo are popular public spaces where people of all ages interact and it is important to note that these are not just youth sites, but places where adults also socialise, with an obvious implication for child safety. MySpace is reported to receive more hits than Google. Facebook, a competitor, now enables externally-developed applications to be added so that users can extend their networks and means of collaboration.

Some social networking websites are being used by millions of people everyday on a regular basis and it now seems that social networking is a part of everyday life. Rapid advances in web communication have meant that some sites now combine a range of different services like a one-stop-shop to cater for all your needs. Social networking sites were originally developed to connect 'friends', but recent innovations include not only showing who is friends with whom, but giving users more control over content and connectivity. Digital photography and video editing mean that people are creating their own content and uploading it to the web.

## What does the research say?

Recent studies of children and young people's online behaviour indicate that there are a wide range of activities undertaken, from using the internet for research to a wide range of recre-

ational and learning activities. Research by the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) highlights young people's engagement with the Web 2.0 user-generated content websites such as YouTube and Flickr, and social networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook:

*Over 40 per cent of children and young people have some of their own material on the internet and a third have a page on a social networking site. From age 14 onwards, 70 per cent or more of teenagers are engaged in some form of web authorship. Among 16–17 year olds, two-thirds have an online profile on a website such as MySpace, 40 per cent have posted their own photographs or artwork on the web, and one in six have their own blog (ACMA).*

Authoring of web content is more commonly reported by girls than boys. This is particularly evident when it comes to having a profile on a user-generated website and having artwork or photos posted online, with around 70 per cent of girls aged 14–17 having a MySpace or similar profile, compared with 50 per cent of boys at that age. The UK Office of Communications research shows that almost 50 per cent of children aged 8–17 who use the internet have set up their own profile on a social networking site. Similar studies in the USA also indicate greater use of social networking sites by girls than boys.

Production of the more complex forms of media such as videos or original music is less common, however. Around one in eight 14–17 year olds say that they have a video of their own posted online and less than one in 10 have their own music or music compilation posted online.

### Internet safety

New international guidelines for safer use of social networking services, such as Facebook, MySpace and Bebo have been launched in the UK Parliament. ACMA has been an important contributor to the development of the guidelines to help providers of social networking services. The *Good Practice Guidance for Providers of Social Networking and Other User Interactive Services* is a vital step in providing a global safety net.

Technology allows students to connect with more people, in more ways, more often. Although older generations may find communicating via technology impersonal, the Net Generation sees technology as improving their communication.

Students will not always be online in protected environments so they must develop the strategies required to interact safely and responsibly online in three basic areas:

- learning what's appropriate to say or post in a public forum
- how to discern truth from fiction
- how to evaluate information and potential threats

- how to recognise and exit from an inappropriate interaction

Hawkesdale P-12 College balances transparency with privacy, allowing students some freedom, yet protecting them and ensuring their safety is of prime concern.

Tips for other schools include:

- Watch videos on cybersafety, consult online sites and hold classroom discussions to establish safe and responsible online behaviours;
- Constantly reinforce the need for safety during class, for example, use no surnames, no addresses or phone numbers or other personal details when online;
- Each student creates their own avatar using MS Paint or another avatar when creating websites. This is their personal 'photographic ID' for blogging purposes, voicethreads and other online sites. (See image below);
- Parents sign permission forms agreeing to the publishing online of student work and online photographs, on the condition that no names are attached. Group photos are used where possible;
- A checklist enables teachers to ensure these conditions are adhered to;
- A partnership with parents is essential. At information evenings with primary years parents, outline the pedagogy for the use of blogs and other Web 2.0 tools and highlight cybersafety issues;
- A 'techno corner' article appears weekly in the school and community newsletter;
- Parents are encouraged to 'adopt' a student who may not have the internet at home;
- Staff and Principal add comments to student blogs, so students are aware that they are constantly being monitored;
- Teachers have joint administration rights with students on their blogs, so comments, posts and incoming links are moderated;
- An RSS reader on teacher Google readers alerts teachers to new posts from students.

### What are schools doing?

As with any new technologies, many schools and teachers are working in this innovative space in order to engage and motivate students, to



*Avatars - Years 3 & 4 introduce themselves on a wiki using Vokis between Taradale, NZ and Hawkesdale P-12.*

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improve their literacy and ICT skills, but also to prepare them as citizens in a global world. The following snapshots highlight innovative practice by creative teachers who are using Web 2.0 applications in their classrooms:

### **Blogs for Learning**

Global Teacher and Global Student are a good place to start blogging and there are some great ready made projects just waiting for teachers. Go to <<http://globalteacher.org.au/>>. During 2007 Gail discovered a blogging environment known as Classblogmeister, which comes with its own support network of teachers and global community. This allowed her to set up individual student blogs as part of her own class blog. All her student blogs could be within her blogging space which gives her simple and easy control over them. In her class blog this year she is able to easily add more classes to her blog, hence can maintain or combine any work from 2007. Check out her blog at: <[http://classblogmeister.com/blog.php?blogger\\_id=97161](http://classblogmeister.com/blog.php?blogger_id=97161)>. As Gail says:

*Blogging is fun but it is even more enjoyable and rewarding when you are sharing your learning with others. Once you have learnt how to blog then join a blogging community and allow your class to experience richer learning.*

(For further information: Gail Casey, Geelong High School)

### **Global Learning for Fun**

Students gain immediate feedback and comments on their blogs at <<http://backyard.globalstudent.org.au/>> from people in Australia, USA and Hawaii. No longer is it simply a teacher reading and evaluating their work but an authentic audience who want to know more and can tell the students a little about their geographic areas. This becomes a real motivator for further writing and research. It increases student reading and writing skills. Most students are happy to read posts from students on the other side of the globe and will do so for an hour without realising time has gone. They learn appropriate etiquette in commenting and are constantly prompted to

expand their posts with greater detail. Awareness of people from other cultures who may read their posts, leads them to learning correct ways of dealing with digital and global citizenship. Further outcomes include the learning of cyber-safety, copyright and plagiarism issues while in the classroom.

Using Skype, Ann contacted a school in Korea. One of the boys found a blue-tongued lizard near the technology shed, so it became the movie star and the Korean students could even see its blue tongue moving in and out. Following the sessions, many Korean students blogged that they were inspired to improve their aural and written English. Australian students learned about their culture, their impeccably polite manners and saw snow falling on the Korean schoolyard, complete with a Korean worker sweeping the snow from the front door step.

*"Students love to see their work online.*

*They want their work to look good, including my often 'difficult to motivate year 9 and 10 boys'. They are happy for their parents to view their work and parents of the younger students make comments on their posts.*

(For further information: Ann Mirtschin, Hawkesdale P12 College)

### **A Passion for Homework**

Year 5-6 students at Bellaire Primary school have developed Passion Projects. Working with GlobalStudent blogs and a range of other add-ins and tools, students were guided through a process where they generated questions, researched and presented personal anecdotes about topics as diverse as Coeliac disease, NBA, drums and computer gaming. After the initial setup, some time in class was given to providing instruction on how to use the online GlobalStudent blogging environment. Apart from some discussion of content and issues of safety and copyright, these six month projects were then largely completed as work done at home. This contrasted with traditional homework that was also being conducted at the same time.

As they revealed a need, different students were also introduced to a range of ancillary products. These products included the use of:

- Talking avatars such as Vokis as a means of providing a 'spoken' personalised introduction to the blog;
- The inclusion of map-based counters such as Clustrmaps to provide the students with information on the number and location of visitors to the blogs. The recognition provided by these maps also served as a major motivational factor for further development of the project;
- Survey tools such as SurveyMonkey in order to collect and collate survey based information about preferences such as favourite characters and the like;

**As the internet continues to evolve, educators must keep pace with the latest tools and understand both the opportunities and threats these present.**



*A Day in a Sentence' Voicethread, where teachers throughout the world described their day via audio, video or text. <http://murch.globalteacher.org.au/2008/03/11/a-day-in-a-voicethread/>*

- Presentation tools such as Slideshare as an online means of including PowerPoint-based presentations in their blogs;
- Inspiration to plan and revise planning for the project prior to exporting them as digital images for inclusion in the blogs;
- The online digital image repository Flickr to locate free Creative Commons licensed images for inclusion in their blogs when they were unable to provide images of their own.

Students were also expected to view other student's blogs and add comments on the content and direction of their colleague's work. The students also were provided with in context discussion on the etiquette of posting and adding comments. Initially many of the comments offered by students were a little self serving, however most students became very proficient at using the comment functionality to advance their understanding.

(For further information: John Pearce, Salty Solutions and Bellarine Primary School)

### The Flat Classroom

A teacher from Canada, Jeff Whipple, came into the library via the internet, projected onto an Interactive Whiteboard (IWB) and using Bridgit conferencing tools to teach Hawkesdale grades 4-6 students about how to use wikis in the 1001 tales Global Project that they were going to be involved in.

This had benefits for all concerned – an expert in the field could teach them all with his laptop, from the privacy of his home, about this wonderful Web 2.0 tool. He also taught them about the area he lives in.

As a reciprocal gesture, Ann from Hawkesdale taught Canadian students about Australia while online at 10pm at night while all 115 Canadian students were seated in their school theatre listening to her through Skype and then logging onto the wiki that she had produced. The student comments revealed much about their enjoyment of the interaction but also about their learning and interest in the topic. Canadian students are not really blocked out of anything and use Facebook for classroom use. Have a look at her blog and at the student comments at <http://murcha.wordpress.com/2008/04/12/teaching-20-students-using-flatclassrooms/>.

(For further information: Ann Mirtschin, Hawkesdale P12 College)

### Fear or education?

What better way to learn the skills of communication, collaboration and protective online behaviour than by working with educationally, age-appropriate tools? As the internet continues to evolve, educators must keep pace with the latest tools and understand both the opportunities and threats these present. Many schools look for

options to control technologies by blocking sites and tools that could help teach these lessons. We must develop policies that strike a balance between safety and freedom while still allowing teachers to use the tools that are a part of everyday life for today's students.

The benefits as well as the risks to young people have been well documented. How can teachers and parents contribute? While some schools ban activity of any sort, this often raises awareness and promotes its use. Teachers and parents are encouraged to talk with their students or children about the benefits and the risks, to educate them about the threats to personal safety when revealing personal information online.

Safe and responsible use means that young people can realise the benefits of online collaboration by learning about how to minimise the risks. In the words of one teacher:

*Students are able to develop skills for detecting safety issues, various approaches to avoiding them and the means of coping with them, should any arise, whilst they in the safety of the classroom. This will stand them in good stead in their outside online life.*

### What can I do in my school?

If you wish to establish social networking sites for your school or classroom:

- Investigate with students some good sites they can sign up to;
- Check on the minimum age that sites will accept;
- Look for site information for teachers and parents;
- Look for joint administrator rights for teachers on their students' sites;
- Expect safety tips and good advice on the site;
- Check that the site has moderators who monitor the site;
- Look for the location of the site and assess whether it complies with Australian standards.

### Where do I start?

Try one of these simple to use sites:

- The Global Teacher Project is a joint project between the Victorian Education Channel and



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the School Library Association of Victoria.

<<http://globalteacher.org.au/>>;

- EduBlogs hosts many thousands of blogs for educators and students internationally and is based in Melbourne. <<http://edublogs.org/>>;
- Classroom 2.0 is an international collaborative community of educators. <<http://www.classroom20.com/>>;
- Skype enables voice over the internet (VOIP) for real time interactions for global learning. <<http://www.skype.com/>>;
- Wikispaces for the Classroom. <<http://www.wikispaces.com/site/for/teachers100K>>;
- Ning is an educational social network. <<http://education.ning.com/>>.

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*Cecilie Murray is Director of Delphian eLearning specialising in strategic planning and research for learning innovations and emerging technologies that enhance education for the future.*