

Teaching in a Socially Networked Classroom

Today's students are always plugged in and ready to learn—so why not take advantage of this trend inside the classroom?

By William Kist

Social networking expands learning and teaching opportunities for students and teachers.

Let's face it: Social networking is here to stay. Whether it is Facebook or Twitter, or the next web application waiting to become a phenomenon, social networking is a part of our students' lives. The only place where it isn't usually present is in our classrooms. And yet, how many of us haven't sensed our students itching to reconnect as soon as class is over? The moment they leave the classroom, the cell phones come out and the air is abuzz with various versions of, "Where are you?" or "What are you doing?"



Imagine if we could harness this drive to connect for the purpose of learning. Is it possible to use social networking to further learning?

While doing research for my book, *The Socially Networked Classroom: Teaching in the New Media Age*, I spoke with dozens of pioneering teachers across the country and even around the world about how they are figuring out ways create a new media classroom while keeping their students safe and focused on learning. Their responses covered a range of examples, from social networking in a low-tech environment to teaching at the most advanced levels of technological innovation.

The result is a real-world chronicle of their attempts to navigate the socially networked classroom and their struggles against the barriers that we all encounter—lack of technology, lack of support, lack of time, and, of course, standardized curriculum and testing. Their experiments weren't always successful, but each attempt gave them insights that helped them further refine their methods.

Take, for example, Rachelle Ring, a sixth-grade teacher at West Branch Elementary in West Branch, Ohio. She took advantage of an intranet setup at her school to set up blogs for all her students. She monitors all student blog comments and admits that she has trouble keeping up.

"It's difficult when I need to get around the room to answer questions or supervise students who may be off task," she said.

However, Ring said she feels it is worth the trouble; she has noticed quite a jump in student engagement with writing as she has added blogging to her classroom. She plans to add online literature circles with another teacher in the building and have students collaborate and communicate about the literature they are reading through blogging rather than traditional classroom writing.

Elizabeth Helfant, a former chemistry teacher who is now the instructional technologist at the Upper School of the Mary Institute and Saint Louis Country Day School in Missouri, shepherds a variety of Web 2.0 projects in her school. She described how the science teachers in her school use wikis to assess lab reports.

“The wiki allows the teacher to see exactly who did what part and when it was done, and the wiki also offers students a discussion area to negotiate the lab results. Teachers can watch as the lab report is created and can also offer students feedback during the process using the discussion tab,” said Helfant.

She views the wiki as helping the teacher monitor work levels of various group members.

“Keeping track of student progress may also be aided by using Google Notebook with the ‘Clip to Notebook’ add-on,” said Helfant, allowing the teacher and librarian to monitor the research that the student is doing. “Everything that they collect electronically, text and images, can be highlighted, and when the students right click, they get an option to send it to their notebook.”

There is also a space for the teacher to make comments and potentially guide further research.

“It provides a means for assessing the skill that is being taught while it is being taught,” she said.

Even Facebook can be used for educational purposes, though most schools still filter access to the site as well as to similar social networking platforms. During my research for *The Socially Networked Classroom*, only one teacher I interviewed admitted to using Facebook unfiltered within the school day in a K-12 setting, but I’ve since heard of several more. The uses of Facebook are too powerful to ignore, even though—as the teacher I found said—his project “flew under the radar screen” of his school’s administrators.

Brett Moller is head of learning and educational technologies at a private school in Queensland, Australia. He was working as a media teacher at his previous school when he used Facebook in a project with another teacher who taught religion. The religion teacher expressed a desire to use media more in his classroom, so Moller showed him Facebook. For several years, Moller had his students post their final films on Facebook. Brett connected with a group of media professionals who gave his students positive feedback about their films, all of which was done through Facebook.

“I showed this teacher, and he got excited,” Moller explained. “The idea was to get students who were doing a unit on theoretical ethics and ethical issues to learn a small amount of the content well enough to teach it to the rest of the class in a creative and effective way.”

Each student was given a prompt related to an ethical issue, such as slavery in the cocoa industry, for example. Students were expected to research both sides of the ethical situation and then communicate their own ideas in blogs and podcasts.

“Facebook was used to connect the group members with the experts in the given fields, most of whom were professors in areas of ethics or philosophy,” Moller said.

As each group began to blog and produce podcasts about its issue, some local university professors played a crucial role. The professors, who were “keen about the project,” Moller said, began to generate some critical

thinking on the site by posting some “devil’s advocate” arguments, trying to suggest, for example, that stopping slavery would mean the end of candy bars as we know them.

When I asked about security issues, Moller responded that the Facebook group was set up in a completely secure way, allowing only the students and the university professors to comment. Moller said he only had one parent complaint about the project, and when he showed her that it’s impossible for an outsider to log into the group, she was satisfied with the project’s safety. He did admit there were some challenges to this project.

“You still have to be a vigilant teacher,” he said. “At the beginning, kids were more interested in checking their own Facebook profiles.”

These are just a few examples of the possibilities and challenges of using social networking for learning. The teachers I’ve interviewed each take a different approach to the tools available to them, but they all believe passionately in what they do and in opening up a new world for themselves and their students.

William Kist is an associate professor at Kent State University, where he teaches literacy education courses at the graduate and undergraduate levels. His book, The Socially Networked Classroom, presents a snapshot of how teachers are currently using Web 2.0 to educate today’s students. Complete with real-world examples, lesson plans, sample assignments, and assessments, the book is available from Corwin.

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