

INFORMATIONAL BRIEF ON SOCIAL NETWORKING IN EDUCATION

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Introduction

Last year, the *Pew Internet & American Life Project* released survey results indicating that nearly three-quarters of teenage internet users spend time on social networking websites.¹ While critics characterize social networking sites as portals for antisocial and unproductive behavior, there is increasing evidence that these sites improve technology proficiency, enhance social skills, and foster learning. In fact, a 2007 National School Boards Association study found that 60% of students use social networks to talk about educational topics, and 50% of students use the networks to “talk specifically about school-work.”² These statistics suggest that education is developing a new presence in the online world of social media.

“*Educational Networking*,”³ the use of social networking technologies for educational purposes, aligns with federal and state goals to promote innovative and collaborative technology. However, few education systems have considered adopting educational networking initiatives. Concerns regarding privacy, legality, and safety prevent educators from embracing a potentially valuable tool. Policymakers supportive of educational networking struggle to overcome political and logistical barriers to implementation.

This paper briefly outlines the benefits and concerns associated with implementing educational networking in New York State districts and schools. Using evidence from case studies and academic research, it recommends that an educational networking pilot program be implemented in select New York State schools and districts. The pilot program would be strictly structured so as to maximize the benefits and minimize the risks of educational networking. Should the pilot prove successful, educational networking can be presented to additional schools as a tool to improve academic performance, engagement, and student leadership.

Benefits

Educational networking has the potential to improve student learning. Studies examining blogging, micro-blogging (e.g. Twitter), and wiki initiatives indicate that social networking enriches the learning environment in the following ways:

- Early Recognition of Student Needs and Formative Assessment.

Social networking platforms allow teachers to provide direct and immediate instructional guidance in and outside of the classroom. As a result, students can confirm their understanding of concepts and assignments with ease. Because social networking sites encourage continual submissions, teachers have an abundance of material on which to better assess student learning. Students having difficulty with concepts or subjects can be identified more quickly than with occasional assignments or tests, thus allowing for early interventions. More frequent and informal review of students’ work opens the door for formative assessment.

- Establishment of Classroom Community.

The use of educational networks supplements the typical “teacher-to-student” model of instruction. By facilitating student collaboration, networks transform passive learning into active learning. Students form a community that shares ideas, approaches, and resources. As a result, students gain access to a variety of learning styles in an environment that is encouraging and intrinsically democratic. Students indicate that online class discussions are both valuable and enjoyable.⁴

¹ Lenhart, Amanda. “Social Media and Young Adults.” *Pewinternet.org*. Pew Research Center, 2010. Web. 25 Jan 2011. <<http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2010/Social-Media-and-Young-Adults.aspx>>.

² Grunwald Associates & National School Boards Association. “Creating & connecting: Research and guidelines on online social—and educational—networking.” *Nsba.org*. National School Boards Association, 2007. Web. 6 Feb. 2011 <<http://nsba.org/site/docs/41400/41340.pdf>>.

³ Educational Networking. *Educationalnetworking.org*. Web. 1 Feb 2011. <<http://www.educationalnetworking.com/>>.

⁴ Minocha, Shailey. “A case study-based investigation of students’ experiences with social software tools.” *New Review of Hypermedia and Multimedia*, 15.3, Dec. 2009, 245-265.

- Student Engagement.

Because students are familiar with and enjoy online social networks, they are automatically more receptive to material presented on these types of platforms. Students state that social network-presented material is more interesting than teacher-taught material; teachers confirm that concepts effectively presented through social networks can be better grasped than those presented through traditional teaching.⁵ A study on the use of social networking to improve literacy demonstrated that students were less hesitant to make comments in an online environment. Encouraged by the informality of the online environment, students engaged more in class discussions. As a result of increased participation, student writing and reading skills improved.⁶ Additionally, by viewing student profiles, teachers gain a glimpse into the out-of-school lives of students. A better understanding of student interests allows teachers to tailor teaching to individual preferences, thus further encouraging student engagement. In the aforementioned literacy program, the teacher capitalized on her knowledge of student interest in *anime* to create engaging, *anime*-oriented classroom activities.⁷

- Increased Sense of Student Achievement.

The ability to upload and showcase work gives students a sense of achievement and ownership. Educators in California's Saugus Union School District confirm that students exhibit more confidence after using educational networking tools.⁸ By allowing students to ask for help and receive advice instantly, social networks engender a sense of control over one's learning. Students are more likely to excel in school if they take pride in their work and believe they have control over their academic performance.

- Information Management.

The ability to integrate video clips, photos, hyperlinks, and music clips within a single platform allows teachers to easily organize information. The inclusion of multimedia results in a richer learning environment and allows educators to link different disciplines. Students express that access to different multimedia tools aids learning and improves engagement.⁹

- Access to Marginalized Students.

Certain students are difficult to engage in class and often fail in a traditional classroom setting. However, these students are often highly creative and proficient with technology. Using social networks is an opportunity to reach these marginalized students. A study by the National School Boards Association suggests that in an online environment, these students not only actively engage in discussions, but also exhibit leadership skills.¹⁰

Concerns

Despite the benefits of educational networking, schools have been reluctant to incorporate the tools into the curriculum. Much of this reluctance stems from the risks inherent in student internet usage. The internet exposes students to inappropriate material, unwanted adult interactions, and bullying from peers. These risks are heightened by the naturally risky behavior of school-aged children. However, attempts to reduce risks through restricted access also limit students' exposure to beneficial sites and interactions. As such, educational networking programs will struggle to balance risks and rewards. The following summarizes various additional concerns regarding the use of educational networking in classrooms:

⁵ Minocha.

⁶ Pasfield-Neofitou, Sarah E. "Creative Applications of Social Networking for the Language Learning Class." *The International Journal of Learning*, 12.4, 2008.

⁷ Pasfield-Neofitou.

⁸ Farkus, George, et. al. "Final Report on Saugus Union School District's SWATTEC Program." *Saugusud.org*. University of California, Irvine, 2010. Web. 2 Feb. 2011 < <http://community.saugusud.org/jklein/files/-1/1879/UCI-SUSD-final-report-2010.pdf> >.

⁹ Minocha.

¹⁰ Coombs.

- Legality.

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC), which administers the implementation and regulation of the Children's Internet Protection Act (CIPA), outlines requirements for schools and libraries that receive federal funding for Internet access or internal connections. CIPA requires schools to maintain appropriate privacy protection and strategies to address privacy-related threats, identity issues and social risks. Schools receiving federal funding fear that the use of educational networks could put their funding at risk. Even though educational networking can be adopted within the confines of CIPA regulations, schools tend to be extremely cautious with regard to internet safety: over half of the nation's school districts have internet filtering systems that are stricter than those required by CIPA.¹¹

- Privacy of Educators.

As the popularity of social networks increases, more teachers, principals, and administrators create personal accounts. Educators are held to high standards with regards to professional conduct both at work and in their personal lives. Social network profiles bring educators' personal lives into the public domain and could expose ethically-questionable behavior or language. While teachers are protected under the First Amendment, inappropriate posts or pictures could cause teachers to lose the respect of students and colleagues. Additionally, there is evidence that teachers have been reprimanded for what their supervisors consider inappropriate online behavior. Several teachers in the New York City school system have been fired for inappropriate material on their personal Facebook pages.¹² A simple solution would be for educators to create two separate accounts: a professional account and personal account.¹³ Required workshops on digital citizenship would help inform educators of appropriate social networking behavior.

- Equity of Access.

One of the benefits of educational networking is that learning extends beyond classroom hours. However, this is only true for students who have access to a computer and the internet in their homes. According to a 2010 Pew Research Center Report, only 40% of low income households (< \$30,000/year) have home broadband access while 87% of high income (> \$75,000) have home broadband access.¹⁴ Therefore, the use of educational networking could exacerbate the educational divide between lower- and higher-income students. Higher-income students would reap the benefits of educational networks, while lower-income students would not, and as a result, might be negatively impacted by the program's introduction.

- Lack of Resources.

The most cited reason for reluctance to implement new technology is lack of professional development resources.¹⁵ Teachers need to be well trained in order to effectively use educational networks in their curricula. Schools and teachers lack the time and the funding to undergo extensive educational network training. If educational networking programs are implemented without proper professional development, the risks to students will be high and rewards are unlikely to be substantive. However, while schools may not have the resources to provide direct training for teachers, there is an abundance of resources available online. Social networking platforms like Classroom 2.0 and Ning host group pages for educators using educational networking in classrooms. These "networks about networks" allow educators to learn about using the platform while simultaneously honing their platform skills.

¹¹ Lemke, C., Coughlin, E., Garcia, L., Reifsnider, D., & Baas, J. (2009). Leadership for Web 2.0 in Education: Promise and Reality. Culver City, CA: Metiri Group. Commissioned by CoSN through support from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation.

¹² Chiamonte, Perry and Yoav Gonen. "Teachers Fired for Flirting on Facebook with Students." *FoxNews*. Fox News, October, 2010. Web. 7 Feb. 2011. < <http://www.foxnews.com/scitech/2010/10/18/teachers-fired-flirting-facebook-students/> >.

¹³ Coombs.

¹⁴ Jansen, Jim. "The Better-Off Online." *Pewresearch.org*. Pew Research Center Internet & American Life Project, November 2010. Web. 24 Nov. 2010 < <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1809/internet-usage-higher-income-americans> >.

¹⁵ Drexler, Wendy, et al. *The Teach Web 2.0 Consortium: a tool to promote educational social networking and Web 2.0 to use among educators*. Educational Media International: 45.4, 2008.

Implementing educational networking in New York State.

It is clear that educational networking programs have numerous benefits and hold the potential to put New York State at the forefront of educational technology utilization. However, because of the delicate balance between reward and risk, it is advisable that a pilot program be launched only among districts that are well-positioned and willing to embrace educational networking. Consulting organizations like edSocialMedia can assist the State with the development and implementation of an educational networking pilot. The following outlines the necessary components for a successful pilot program:

- Criteria for pilot schools.

Successful programs require support from administrators, teachers, and parents. Therefore, schools chosen for a pilot should be able to demonstrate endorsement from all involved parties. A survey of stakeholders is an efficient means of testing and proving support for the tool. Once a school proves its willingness to participate in the pilot, it must also demonstrate its ability to accommodate the program. A formal rubric should be established to determine which schools will participate in the pilot. Participating schools should have both the physical infrastructure and training resources necessary for the program. All students must have access to computers in order to alleviate the issues of equity. Professional development resources are necessary to ensure that teachers understand the technology and can use it optimally.

- Accompanying evaluations.

To determine whether educational networking is effective in enhancing learning and fostering leadership, process and impact evaluations are necessary. A process evaluation ensures that the educational networking program is being implemented as intended. An impact evaluation is necessary to determine whether the pilot is successful and can then be offered to additional schools and districts. Quantitative results are particularly compelling, and therefore the use of test scores as a measure of success should be considered. For example, the University of California, Irvine's evaluation of Saugus Union School District's laptop program was an especially informative pilot because it yielded quantitative results that proved to be statistically significant and could therefore later be used to justify project expansion decisions.¹⁶

- Appropriate Use Policy for Educational Networking.

Schools participating in a pilot must agree to adhere to formal guidelines along with appropriate conduct and usage. An appropriate use policy for educational networking must be established, agreed upon, and disseminated *prior* to pilot implementation. This policy should build on existing internet safety policies and acceptable use policies (AUPs). Content should be specific to the networking platform chosen (to be discussed below) and should include explicit instructions to teachers regarding how to deal with all aspects of the online environment (e.g., advertisements, comments, chat, bullying, etc.). However, this policy should be flexible enough for further adaptation and adoption in interested districts and schools. Formal guidelines delineated in the policy serve primarily to ensure safety and privacy of teachers and students.

An educational networking committee consisting of members from all stakeholder groups (i.e. students, teachers, administrators, parents, members of the community) should be established to create, revise, and solidify the appropriate use policy. Arriving at the final version of the policy will, and should, be an intensive process. If the pilot is expanded beyond its first year, content should be revisited so that the document is ever-evolving, effective, and relevant. IBM implemented a similarly dynamic set of guidelines for its internal blogging policy. After determining the guidelines in 2006, IBM re-initiated the revision process in 2008 and 2010 to accommodate for new technologies and online tools.¹⁷

¹⁶ Farkus.

¹⁷ Allen, Justin. "IBM's Blogging Policy Increases Engagement." Ragan.com, March, 2010. Web. 26 Jan 2011. <http://www.ragan.com/Main/Articles/IBMs_blogging_policy_increases_engagement_37412.aspx>.

An appropriate use policy for educational networking should include the following content¹⁸:

- Description of goals/purpose of educational networking.
- Explanation that other school policies and laws also apply to educational networking sites.
- Explanation of the limits of privacy in online environments.
- Reminder that it is difficult to perceive “tone” in online communications.
- Clear statement of expected online behaviors.
- Clear statement of unacceptable and dangerous online behaviors.
- Guidance for administrators, teachers, and parents for managing inappropriate behavior and escalation of misunderstandings.
- Guidance for teachers for maintaining personal privacy and serving as an exemplar for appropriate online networking behavior.

Examples of school internet policies referencing electronic media include:

Weber School District (UT)	Appropriate Use Policy
Hopkins County School District (KY)	Acceptable Use Policy (Board Policy – Access to Electronic Media)
Minnetonka Public Schools (MN)	Policy #470: Employee Use of Social Media
City of Salem Public Schools (VA)	Guidelines for Using Ning© in the Classroom

- Best Practices.

While the appropriate use policy serves primarily to ensure the safety and privacy of educators and students, a “best practices” document helps educators make the most of educational networking. A best practices document should highlight ways to instill digital citizenship, maximize accessibility, and allow freedom of contributions:

- Digital Citizenship: schools should require digital citizenship training for students, teachers, and parents. Using resources like i-SAFE Inc., digital citizenship should be incorporated into the curriculum for students. Lessons will help students and teachers understand safe and appropriate online behavior. Teacher understanding of digital citizenship can be supplemented by information from networking groups on Classroom 2.0 and Ning and from websites like digitalcitizenshiped.com. A list of online digital citizenship tutorials and websites, such as commonsensemedia.org/educators, can be distributed to parents.

- Accessibility: a key benefit of educational networking is that it extends learning beyond the classroom. To capitalize on this opportunity, teachers should try to make themselves available through the site as much as permitted by their contracts. To further improve school/home connectivity, networking invitations should be extended to parents of students. Steps should be taken to extend internet access to those without home access. Simple solutions to inequality of access include accommodations such as extended computer lab hours and reserved computers at local libraries with access to networking sites.

- Freedom of contributions: educational networking works best when students feel that they can participate freely and relatively informally. Excessive assessment and strict guidelines for assignments involving social networking can negate the benefits of educational networking, perhaps permanently. Similarly to what Kelly Gallagher terms, “Reacidide,” forcing students to continually complete graded online assignments or actively participate in mandated educational networks can “kill” the enthusiasm students have for these tools.¹⁹ Therefore, usage should be tempered between formal graded interactions and informal interactions as checkpoints for formative assessment. In this way educators can emphasize freedom of expression (i.e. form and frequency) and avoid excessive assessment.

18 Junco, Reynol. “The Need for Student Social Media Policies.” Educause.edu. Educause Review, Feb. 2011. Web. 20 Feb. 2011 <
<http://www.educause.edu/EDUCAUSE+Review/EDUCAUSEReviewMagazineVolume46/TheNeedforStudentSocialMediaPo/222666>
 >.

¹⁹ Coombs.

- Platform Options.

As previously discussed, the rewards and risks associated with educational networking are correlated. Different networking platforms attempt to balance this relationship in different ways; some opt for "open access" to all opportunities (and risks); others prefer to reduce opportunities in exchange for lower risk. The following section evaluates the reward/risk relationship of a few popular educational networking tools:

- Facebook/MySpace:

Benefits of choosing Facebook or MySpace stem from their ease of use. Unlike platforms that require educators to create groups, profiles and activities, traditional networking sites have many of these components built-in. Educational Facebook applications are already available for teachers to utilize. Furthermore, because Facebook and MySpace use is so widespread, minimal training is needed for teachers and students; inexperienced teachers can easily learn through online tutorials. The use of these sites for entertainment and personal correspondence may help students view homework on the site as less of a burden. The ease of navigating from a personal page to a school page may encourage more consistent contributions and solidify the school/home connection.

Risks associated with choosing Facebook or MySpace consist mainly of safety and privacy concerns. When used for personal correspondence and entertainment, these sites have been criticized by parents for their inability to keep children safe from adult predators and peer bullying. The online environment provides anonymity, and thus opens the door to attacks that may not have occurred face-to-face. Privacy is also a concern as the school/home boundary is crossed. Teachers may fear repercussions for personal pictures or comments and may feel uncomfortable having access to students' personal lives. An additional concern from parents is that students will use educational time on Facebook/MySpace as an excuse to procrastinate with friends online.

- Ning:

Platforms like Ning allow users to create their own social networking websites. Educators can create school or class websites tailored to their students' unique needs. While the creation of such websites does not require programming code, training is necessary to ensure optimal creation and use of sites. Because most teachers and students will be unfamiliar with Ning, they may use it less than they would traditional networking sites. Furthermore, because Ning would be used exclusively for school, students are more apt to equate use of the site with "homework" and thus are less likely to use it frequently at home.

Because Ning requires building an isolated website, children are somewhat insulated from unwanted approaches from other Internet users. General internet users would need to know the classroom's URL or stumble upon it to gain access to the site. While this is possible, it is far less likely that students will be approached by predators while using Ning than while using traditional networking sites. Because Ning will exist in addition to personal profiles on traditional networking sites, privacy of students and teachers will be protected. Unfortunately, use of Ning cannot prevent students from bullying each other while online.

- ELGG:

ELGG is the open source response to Ning. Educators create their own networking websites that include profiles, friend lists, photo sharing, blogs, and more. Usability and accessibility concerns are the same as with the Ning platform. Teachers and students will need time to become familiar with the platform. Again, because use of the site requires navigation away from traditional networking sites, students may visit ELGG sites less frequently.

The ELGG platform provides the greatest degree of safety and privacy. Unlike Facebook/MySpace and Ning, ELGG collects no data from users. There are various privacy settings that can prevent outside users from accessing the site; however, bullying remains a potential issue. Privacy is protected, as students and teachers maintain separate profiles on traditional networking sites.

	Facebook/MySpace	Ning	ELGG
Creation of site	No	Yes	Yes
Procrastination concerns	High	Low	Low
Familiarity among teachers and students	High	Low	Low
Potential for school/home connectivity	High	Low	Low
Protection from adult predators	Low	High	High
Protection from bullying	Low	Low	Low
Protection of privacy	Low (except through separate accounts)	High	High
Cost	Free	Low yearly subscription	Free
K-12 Examples in Use	New Milford, NJ	City of Salem, VA	Seaside, OR

Final Remarks

In conclusion, educational networking tools have the potential to greatly enhance student learning. While there is a shortage of empirical research on educational networking, research on the theory and on comparable initiatives has proven promising. A Harvard Education Press book entitled, "Social Network Theory and Educational Change" stresses that social networks are the key to improving educational outcomes. Using case studies from around the world, the book advocates for policies that promote social capital through increased communication; technologies that promote increased communication and thus social capital should be pursued.²⁰ A pilot program in New York State districts would allow NYSED to test the capability of educational networking to cultivate social capital, a core element of 21st Century Skills²¹ and key component to college and career readiness in the digital age²². Should the program prove effective, New York State could extend the program to additional districts, thus becoming a pioneer in statewide educational networking policy.

Our colleagues at the Regional Educational Laboratory – Northeast and Islands provided us with the key research on social networking issues as they relate to P-12 education. The reference listing is appended.

²⁰ Daly, Alan J. Social Network Theory and Educational Change. Harvard Education Press, 2010. Print.

²¹ Committee on Information Technology Literacy. National Research Council. (1999). Being Fluent with Information Technology. National Academy Press. Pp. 2-14.

²² The Metiri Group. "21st Century Skills." Web. 22 Feb 2011.

<<http://www.metiri.com/21st%20Century%20Skills/PDFtwentyfirst%20century%20skills.pdf>>.

Appendix A

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