INTELLECTUAL FREEDOM FOR YOUTH

Social Technology and Social Networks

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When I was growing up, my friends would hang out at the local Dairy Queen. Today's digital teens may prefer Web-based social networks, such as MySpace <http://myspace.com> and Facebook <http://facebook.com> , as the place to trade gossip, swap stories, and share their dreams and desires. However, social networks can do much more than facilitate friendships. Well-designed social technology such as blogs, wikis, forums, and other collaborative learning spaces can create a dynamic, safe online learning community where lively conversations about issues and reflective problem-solving can take place.

While some conservative politicians and parent groups would like to ban all social networks from schools, it's the role of the teacher-librarian to mediate and guard the rights of children and young adults. According to the American Library Association's (ALA) Office for Intellectual Freedom <www.ala.org/ala/oif> , intellectual freedom is, "the right of any person to hold any belief on any subject and to express that idea in ways that he or she believes is appropriate" (OIF 2005). Social technologies test the boundaries of intellectual freedom precisely because they provide an open forum for ideas.

Eight Ways to Take Action
Some school librarians fear the growth of social technology; others view these tools as an opportunity to enhance thinking and learning. Rather than viewing these tools as negative, school library media specialists should investigate the value of online tools for furthering intellectual freedom by promoting creative thought, communication, and collaboration. How will these technologies affect the school library program? What's the role of the teacher librarian? Let's explore eight ways you can address key issues related to intellectual freedom and social technology for young people.

ISSUE 1: THE CONTROVERSY

Words such as "age inappropriate," "objectionable," and "controversial" often are associated with social technologies. ALA's (2004) "The Freedom to Read Statement" stresses that our young people must learn to make critical judgments, distinguish fact from opinion, and make their own decisions about what they read and believe. The world can be dangerous. However, rather than labeling a particular technology as unacceptable or inappropriate, let's help young people learn to make informed decisions about them.

1

YOUR ROLE

Help adults and young people distinguish between media hype and genuine concerns about social technologies. Then design learning experiences to help young people use the tools in positive, productive ways.

FIRST STEPS

- Read the "Library Bill of Rights" (ALA 1996) and "The Freedom to Read Statement" (ALA 2004). Think about how these statements apply to social technology environments. Identify examples to share with teachers, parents, and administrator that reflect positive, developmentally appropriate applications. For instance, MyFamily.com <http://myfamily.com> is designed as a safe, private tool that families can use to share photos, post news, and build a family tree. It's a great way to involve young people and their parents in sharing family stories.

- Face the safety issue. Rather than issuing general warnings to students such as "the Web can be dangerous" or "don't use MySpace," provide young people with specific, age-appropriate scenarios, examples, and defense strategies. For instance, teach students to recognize the tactics that child predators use to groom their victims. Develop students' senses of social responsibility so that they will speak out against cyberbullying. Teach teens the refusal skills they need to resist peer pressure. Rather than focusing on fear and vague warnings, emphasize awareness and preparation.

- Plan safety lessons about using social technology using the resources from NetSmartz <www.netsmartzkids.org> , GetNetWise <http://kids.getnetwise.org> , and Wired Safety <www.wiredsafety.org> .

- Teach young people about intellectual freedom and personal responsibility. Use Wikipedia <http://wikipedia.com> to show students how people with varied perspectives work collaboratively for the common good to build Web content. Create or edit the Wikipedia page for your town or city to demonstrate how a collaborative wiki works. Discuss the importance of differentiating fact from opinion and citing sources in a "contribution culture."

ISSUE 2: THE LAW

Public schools must adhere to state and federal laws related to information access by young people. The Children's Internet Protection Act (CIPA) requires schools and libraries to use a "technology protection measure," such as filtering software, to protect minors from accessing obscene or pornographic information. In *Youth, Pornography, and the Internet,* editors Dick Thornburgh and Herbert Lin (2002) stress that we must balance our desire to protect children with the need to avoid placing unnecessary restrictions on the many positive resources and tools available through the Internet.

The Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA) requires that commercial Web sites must get parental or teacher consent before gathering personal information from children younger than thirteen. Although most social networks are not designed for children younger than fourteen, an increasing number of new resources are aimed specifically at young people. Recently, bills such as the Deleting Online Predators Act (DOPA) have sought to filter all social technologies from schools. Opponents question any law that would restrict Web access based on the type of technology rather than the content. In other words, this bill would not provide for educational applications of such collaborative tools as blogs and wikis in the classroom.

YOUR ROLE

2

Stay informed about legislative issues and advocate for laws and regulations that help educate young people rather than simply limiting their access.

FIRST STEPS

- Use the ALA Federal Legislative Issues page to keep up-to-date on current issues.

- Review your school's acceptable use policies (AUPs) and ensure that your AUP complies with current state and federal laws. Does your policy encompass social technologies, including social networks, blogs, wikis, and other interactive Web applications?

- Examine the settings of your filtering software. Some systems automatically filter all Web sites that contain chat, forum, blog, wiki, or any other interactive Web applications, including quality, educational resources. Identify and unblock informational and instructional Web sites that meet your selection criteria. Streamline your procedure for unblocking a site so you can easily meet the needs of your students and teachers.

- Consider differentiated use policies for elementary, middle, and high school students to address their unique developmental needs.

- Use Web sites such as Kidz Privacy <www.ftc.gov/bcp/conline/edcams/kidzprivacy> from the Federal Trade Commission to learn more about specific regulations and ways to help young people and adults learn about their rights and responsibilities.

- Encourage students to comply with the law. For instance, help them identify social networking alternatives, such as imbee <http://imbee.com> and Second Life for Teens <http://teens.secondlife.com> , that are designed for young people.

ISSUE 3: THE TOOLS

What makes social technology unique is the ability to instantly collaborate and communicate with others at remote sites. Options such as commenting in blogs and editing in wikis provides young people with the opportunity to participate in large-scale projects, experience multiple perspectives, and collaborate with a global community. By creating keyword tags for articles, visuals, audio, or video posted on Web pages, individuals organize information and make it accessible to others. ALA's "The Freedom to Read Statement" points out that open communication is necessary in a free society and creative culture. Social technologies allow all citizens to publish and circulate their work freely and easily read the work of others.

3

YOUR ROLE

Help students and teachers identify and use the most powerful and practical applications of these social technologies in teaching and learning.

FIRST STEPS

- Identify specific features of social technology that amplify learning. For instance, LibraryThing is a social network that allows users to catalog their book collection, share book reviews, and participate in forums. This type of environment would be useful for keeping a lifelong reading log or facilitating communitywide reading discussions.

- Involve students in reading and commenting on the work of others. Show examples of reading groups, online book clubs, literature circles, and writing projects that benefit from social technology.

- Talk about the rules of netiquette, such as being aware of the guidelines of a community before posting, being courteous, and avoiding slang. Then encourage students to participate and ask questions in such forums as National Geographic's WildCam Africa <www9.nationalgeographic.com/ngm/wildcamafrica> , a live webcam project where viewers can watch animals visiting a protected pond in a game reserve in Botswana.

- Focus on ways that students can use the power of technology for global collaboration. Think.com <www.think.com> is a global project that provides space for teachers to create and facilitate collaborative local, national, or even international online learning communities.

ISSUE 4: THE CONTENT

While social technologies can support the creation of original poetry, music, and scientific data, it also can be a source of negative content, including gossip, violent images, and misinformation. Teens may use adult media-sharing Web sites such as Flickr for photos or YouTube for video. If so, it is essential to help them act responsibly in a social environment not intended for children. Students need to understand how to evaluate Web content, follow copyright laws, and develop effective methods of communication to make optimal use of this environment.

4 YOUR ROLE

Help students and educators evaluate the content of social networks and make responsible decisions regarding accessing and posting information.

FIRST STEPS

- Introduce students to photo-, audio-, and video-sharing Web sites designed specifically for educational purposes. The Apple Learning Interchange <http://edcommunity.apple.com/ali> is a social network in which educators and students can publish movies, images, and sounds. Members of this community can evaluate and rate submissions, such as the Rosa Parks Movie created by students at Upson Elementary <http://edcommunity.apple.com/ali/item.php?itemID=9977>.

- Identify standards-based activities that would benefit from discussions beyond the traditional classroom environment. Newz Crew <www.newzcrew.org> is a project associated with PBS Newshour Extra and Global Kids. High school students read articles and discuss such topics as global warming, euthanasia, and the crisis in Darfur. Involve your students in evaluating the quality of the current postings and developing evidence-based arguments to share.

- Encourage teachers to use social networks as a way to share their professional resources and experiences. Also, consider ways that you and your students can give back to the education community by contributing content to projects. For instance, Wikimedia Commons <http://commons.wikimedia.org> is seeking open source images, sounds, and videos.

ISSUE 5: THE PROFILE

Because social networks are generally rooted in an individual profile, personal information is commonly shared. Profiles help people connect with others who have a shared interest. When young people are participating in online communities, sharing their personal thoughts and ideas, and interacting with strangers, they may come into contact with people who misrepresent themselves or have malicious intent. According to Anastasia Goodstein (2007), author of *Totally Wired: What Teens and Tweens Are Really Doing Online,* teens have a pretty sophisticated understanding of the safety issues associated with social networking; however, they may be impulsive or make poor choices regarding the content they post. Essential information age skills include understanding the consequences of sharing personal information and learning to balance the desire for interaction with the importance of personal safety.

5

YOUR ROLE

Provide young people and their parents with strategies for protecting their personal identity and security.

FIRST STEPS

- Help parents understand the positive and negative aspects of social technology in the lives of many young people. Encourage parents to talk to their children about issues, such as their personal security.

- Introduce students, teachers, and parents to an age-appropriate social network specifically designed for young people. For example, imbee.com requires parent or teacher permission and offers guidance for educational use. Teachers can create class blogs and private group discussions.

- Help students make distinctions between information they might post on a private, password-protected Web site and a public one. For example, suggest using a pen name and limiting personal information in a public environment.

ISSUE 6: THE ACCESS

Many safety concerns are related to access to personal information or contact with potentially dangerous people. However, these concerns should be balanced against the value of giving students an opportunity to publish their intellectual work for a wider audience. Initially, teachers may feel most comfortable working with students in a closed system, such as an Intranet or local network that can be accessed only from within the school. As students and teachers gain confidence and expertise, design projects that reach outside the schools but still contain constraints such as password access. These projects could be read by the entire online community, but may limit participation to registered contributors. Finally, as students become mature social technology users, seek ways to involve them in open educational experiences. When selecting whether to publish projects on the open Web or to participate in activities involving collaboration outside the school, be guided by the potential enrichment of student learning. A lesson that compares life in rural and urban areas would benefit from interactions among students living in these settings.

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YOUR ROLE

Build student social technology skills through guided experiences involving the use of both closed and open social systems.

FIRST STEPS

- Install applications such as the open source Moodle course management software on your Web server. This tool allows you to set up private groups and activities for specific clubs or classes. You might set up a forum where students can share and discuss the books they are reading in a literature circle. While one group may be writing about the characters in Christopher Paul Curtis's *Buddy, Not Buddy* (Yearling, 2002), another group may be sharing, discussing, and voting on Depression era photos that best visualize the setting of the book. As the resources are password-protected, only the class would be able to view the student work.

- Use a collaborative workspace from a service such as Wikispaces or PBwiki to facilitate a group effort such as fiction or nonfiction co-writing or scriptwriting. Create a shared password or provide students with their own username and password. Start by directing students to create an outline of the story or idea. Then each student can build a page focusing on a particular character or setting featured in the story or aspect of the idea. As the story evolves or the information develops, participants can create hyperlinks to each others' pages. Although the story or essay is visible to anyone, including parents, to enjoy, only those with the password can edit the work.

- Build a project that involves classes outside your school. For example, design a science investigation that might benefit from being carried out in different geographic locations. Invite interested participants via e-mail and use the spreadsheet option in Google Docs to collect and share experimental data. Again, the project is restricted to invited members of a specific group.

- Share short digital video productions using an educational Web site such as SchoolTube <www.schooltube.com>. Participants can rate and comment on the video work posted by other students in this open, educationally focused atmosphere.

ISSUE 7: THE POLICIES

Consider how well your collection development, selection, and reconsideration policies address issues associated with the use of Web content and student participation in social networks. Although some issues already will be covered by existing policies, new situations may require revising procedures or policies. If your reconsideration form was written to handle challenges to books and videos, how might it need to be amended to address a challenge to a Web site?

YOUR ROLE

7

Ensure that your library policies are up-to-date and reflect the unique attributes of social technology.

FIRST STEPS

- Review your collection development policy and revise it to include definitions and examples of how each of these tools is used in teaching and learning. If a local group requests that all Web sites containing social features (blogs, wikis, e-mail, forums) be filtered, you should be able to point to the criteria in your policy that support their use and the guidelines that determine their selection.

- Examine your selection policy. Let's say a group of parents wants to ban a Web site with student-created biographies of personal heroes because they don't like the political views of the people profiled. It's likely that your policy addresses the importance of choosing materials that represent multiple perspectives. However, most policies contain statements about the authority of the source that might exclude resources developed by a collaborative group rather than by a well-known publisher. For example, do a dry-run test against your policy using the Pearl Harbor Survivor Stories <www.pearlharborstories.org> oral histories.

- Update your procedures manual to include references to Web resources and social technologies. Think about how you would handle a challenge.

ISSUE 8: THE POTENTIAL

Although establishing and maintaining friendships is the best-known application for social technologies, they also have the potential for many types of collaboration and interaction. For instance, Second Life <http://secondlife.com> is a virtual 3D world where visitors can explore a recreation of the International Space Station, participate in historical reenactments, and take part in musical events. Educators are currently involved with designing "islands" specifically for young learners. As these virtual spaces evolve and more educational applications are identified, teacher-librarians need to be on the lookout for opportunities that involve students in authentic, meaningful activities that promote learning. Young people need opportunities to express themselves. Social networks, blogs, forums, and wikis are just a few of the collaborative tools they can use to explore multiple perspectives, share their opinions, and demonstrate their creativity.

8

YOUR ROLE

Be an advocate of intellectual freedom. Promote applications of social technology that motivate young learners to read, think, and actively participate in meaningful projects and collaborations.

FIRST STEPS

- Help young people and their parents identify age- and content-appropriate networks. For instance, Zoey's Room <http://zoeysroom.com> is a safe online community with nonprofit status in which middle-school girls (ages ten to fourteen) can focus on science, technology, engineering, and math. ClubPenguin <http://clubpenguin.com> and Whyville <www.whyville.net> are designed for children and tweens.

- Identify networks that connect teens to specific academic or personal interests. Young adults can share their book collections on LibraryThing <http://librarything.com> or their recipes on AllRecipes <http://allrecipes.com>. They also can examine social activism on Care2 <http://care2.com> or explore a virtual world in Second Life for Teens <http://teens.secondlife.com>.

- Demonstrate to faculty how collaborative projects can address subject-area standards. Many teachers who use Inspiration proprietary mapping software would be open to experimenting with Gliffy <http://gliffy.com> or Thinkature <http://thinkature.com>, where online concepts maps are shared and updated by invited participants.

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