

Do your peers run the other way when you mention blogs and wikis? These talking points can help turn the tide.

By Michelle Boule



WANT TO INTRODUCE SOCIAL SOFTWARE TO YOUR SCHOOL or library, but have yet to break the ice? You may be comfortable with the idea of using a blog, wiki, or other social application with students, but other stakeholders in your community may not be so sure. Any technology maverick

looking to sell the use of Web-based applications will, at some point, have to make the case. Following are the most common concerns about social networking and ways to address them, an FAQ, of sorts, to help you reassure colleagues, administrators, parents, and IT staff about these exciting new tools.

How can social software enhance learning?

Recent research documenting the educational benefits of technology is good to share with stakeholders. One June 2008 study from the University of Minnesota, for example, has found that, regardless of family income level, students who use social networking sites, such as MySpace and Facebook, demonstrate creativity, learn technology and communication skills, and come into contact with diverse viewpoints (www.reuters.com/article/pressRelease/idUS88628+20-Jun-2008+PRN20080620). Moreover, networking sites often work like small communities, providing a knowledge resource for students who are more likely to turn to their peers for information than engage in traditional research.

A particularly valuable resource is the Pew Internet & American Life Project (www.pewinternet.org), which examines the Web's impact, with a particular focus on both the benefits and drawbacks of a plugged-in life for teens. The latest 2008 report, "Teens, Video Games, and Civics" (www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP_Teens_Games_and_Civics_Report_FINAL.pdf), found that gaming is pervasive among teens, both boys and girls, and involves a complex social component. While young gamers sometimes encounter mature content, they are also more likely to be civically engaged.

Existing efforts of other educators can also help you make the case for integrating social software into your environment. Take Carol Marit's fourth-

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grade class blog (classblogmeister.com/blog.php?blogger_id=119124). The Canadian educator posts a question to her students, who then respond on the blog, all the while exercising skills in writing, comprehension, and criticism. Recently, Marit asked the students to share their personal feelings about birth order and their siblings. The varied responses included traditional prose, freestyle poems, and an acrostic poem.

While using Web-based programs, can students stumble upon inappropriate sites?

It depends on the tool and the version that you are using. Many free applications, such as wikis and social networking sites, have advertising built into the layout of the page. Therefore, a user cannot control what ads appear on their site. Very often, this advertising features clickable links, which can take site visitors to unrelated content or that which is inappropriate to an educational setting. But there are ways around this issue.

Upgrading to a paid version will frequently rid you of advertising. One product, PBWiki, offers wikis for educational use, which are blessedly ad free. As for blogs, some free versions have linking features, which take you to what the software thinks is a related post on another blog. In both Wordpress and Blogger pages, these features can be turned off.

How can we prevent students from disclosing personal information online?

Many social software programs require the creation of an account with a username and password. Depending on the tool you want to use and the age of your students, there are a couple options for protecting their identity. Say, for example, that you want to open a class account in the social bookmarking application Delicious. Then all the students could sign into the same account to add content. This makes it difficult to know who is adding what. If a student decides to add inappropriate material, how would you determine the culprit? With many tools, like a wiki, it makes more sense for each person to have their own account. In this case, kids could each choose an appropriate username (making sure that it in no way relates to their actual name).

Teens, in fact, are pretty careful with their online identities. According to the 2007 Pew report "Teens, Privacy, and Online Social Networks" (www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP_Teens_Privacy_SNS_Report_Final.pdf), students not only know what kind of information not to release to the Internet at large, but they take advantage of the privacy settings available with various tools, releasing certain information only to designated

parties. If you know teens who aren't so savvy or if you have younger children, using social software or the Internet in the classroom is a valuable method for teaching about privacy and safety in a controlled setting.

What about students using the technology for nefarious purposes?

Actually, there are two very simple answers to this question. If every student has a username and password, every change and addition within the application is attributable to the person who made the changes. If a student violates the rules for posting, his or her name will be linked to the content in question.

Before implementing social software, establish a policy—to be shared with students—which details a specific process for disciplining rule breakers, and follow through accordingly. A second option is self-regulation. Kids could create their own policy and police the content themselves. Though certain ages may require more or less teacher supervision, allowing students some measure of control will create a sense of ownership and participation, a true community.

Do outsiders have access to the Web site the students are using and, thus, personal information?

It depends on the application. Many tools, including most blogs and wikis, give you the option of restricting content to designated site users. You could also opt for a version that is installed on your own server. Although a bit more labor intensive and requiring technical expertise, this would allow you to run the Web site on a protected intranet.

Again, encouraging students to use fanciful usernames and teaching a unit on safety and privacy will help protect them in school and beyond.

What about the cost?

Thankfully, social software tools are by and large free or very low-cost. Many applications also offer versions that are designed specifically for educational use.

Social software can enhance the learning process and reach students in mediums they use everyday. When encountering resistance to using these tools in the classroom, remember that it mostly stems from fear and a lack of knowledge. Be prepared with a well-reasoned response and put those fears to rest.

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