Classroom Connections Finding Appropriate Educational Uses

Social-networking sites are influencing the music students listen to, the clothes they wear, and the friends they choose in real life. Now, educators are mulling ways to use that influence to foster deeper ties to schools and education.

Though there are student Facebook pages devoted to everything from a love of physics to school anime clubs for Japanese cartoon enthusiasts, teachers and administrators have been slow to enter the realm. However, social-networking sites may be just the way to reach students whose potential may be overlooked in a traditional school setting.

A 2007 report by the National School Boards Association found that social networking could help schools connect with students the study called nonconformists—those who push back against online safety and behavior rules. A third of the teens studied in the report fell into the nonconformist category, and despite extraordinary technology skills, those students were likely to have lower grades. The report found that nonconformist students were heavier users of social-networking sites, and it urged schools to use such conduits to engage those students.

Social Networking: Good or Bad

Some teachers are doing just that. Alyssa Trzeszkowski-Giese, an English teacher at Robinson Secondary School in the 164,000-student Fairfax County, Va., school system, says she started her own Facebook page, but not with the thought of using it as a pedagogical tool. Once students discovered it, however, they wanted to "friend" her, or become part of the network of people who can view and participate on her personal page.

At first, Trzeszkowski-Giese was reluctant to engage them, but then, realizing there was nothing in her online profile she wouldn't want them to see, she relented. The results, she says, have been a deeper educational connection between students and teacher and a deeper association with the material she's teaching.

"There's not a direct, quantifiable connection between the skills you're teaching them and the Facebook page, but it's more of a holistic approach," she says. "You are their friend and mentor, and it gives you more credibility with them."

Trzeszkowski-Giese, 33, says she realized, for example, that a boy who never participated in class, and who she had assumed was uninterested in the subject material, was actually paying close attention. His Facebook page contained references to her class and the subjects they were studying.

Trzeszkowski-Giese says she has developed her own set of guidelines, though, for interacting with students on Facebook. "I don't go ask a student to be my friend," she says. "That's the one line I draw. Who knows if that would be considered harassment in some weird way." And she's been careful not to delve too closely into students' profiles.

"I generally subscribe to the opinion that what's in school should be in school, and what's outside should stay there," she says. "I don't need to hear about their parties and the crazy drinking that happens. I don't think it's good for the relationship to hear about that."

In the 'Danger Zone'

Teachers do need to be careful, says Michael D. Simpson, the assistant general counsel to the National Education Association, the nation's largest teachers' union. He says teachers have been fired for posting inappropriate content—such as sexually explicit writing—on their MySpace or Facebook pages. At least two state NEA affiliates—Missouri and Ohio—have issued statements saying teachers shouldn't participate in social-networking sites even for personal use, he says.

"I think that's an overreaction. They can be G-rated," Simpson says, pointing out that some teacher sites deal with homework or classroom material. But Simpson cautions that "teachers outside of school should maintain social distance from students." Montana Miller, an assistant professor of popular culture at Bowling Green State University in Ohio and a Facebook expert, says teachers interacting with students on social-networking sites are in the "danger zone." "Facebook is a social-relationship site, not an educational site," she says. "If you're going to have social communication with your students, you have to be very careful as a teacher that you're not coercive."

To avoid such pitfalls, Eden Prairie High in Minnesota uses Moodle, says principal Conn McCartan. Moodle is an interactive, education-oriented software program that provides networking opportunities for teachers and students in a more controlled setting, he says.

Teaching Consequences
Despite the potential problems, teachers have a role to play in educating students about how to navigate social-networking sites in an appropriate way, without jeopardizing their teaching careers, argues Trzeszkowski-Giese, the Virginia teacher.

In her class, she's had students read articles about Lucas Caparelli, a disgruntled Wake Forest University football player who briefly posted a rant on his Facebook page saying he planned to "blow up the campus." The post stayed up for about 90 minutes, but police were alerted and Caparelli, a graduate of her school, Robinson Secondary, was suspended for a semester and can't shake the stigma of being a potentially violent threat to others.

"He didn't realize there were going to be repercussions," Trzeszkowski-Giese says. "Because we as adults haven't fully embraced this technology, we're not teaching students to use it appropriately. We're not explaining the boundaries." **Virginia has a new state initiative, however, that requires schools to educate students at all grade levels on how to use the Internet, and in particular social-networking sites, safely and responsibly.** Timothy J. Magner, the director of the U.S. Department of Education's office of educational technology, also believes schools need to take the lead in helping to educate students and show them that a post or a picture that seems harmless or silly today could keep a student from being accepted to a college or considered for a future job.

"Students don't often have the maturity to recognize that something funny today is not so funny 10 years from now," he says. "Schools have a key role to play in this education."