

## The School's Role

*Digital Directions* sponsored a recent online chat to discuss how social-networking technologies can be used to help students learn and monitor their behavior. Our featured guests were Montana Miller, an assistant professor of popular culture at Bowling Green State University in Ohio and Conn McCartan, the principal of Eden Prairie High School in Eden Prairie, Minn.

## Using Social Networking to Reach Students and Monitor Behavior

### Guests:

- **Montana Miller** is an assistant professor of popular culture at Bowling Green State University in Ohio and is an expert on Facebook who speaks with parents and teachers about the use of social networking sites.
- **Conn McCartan** is the principal of Eden Prairie High School, part of the 10,000-student Eden Prairie, Minn. school district. Earlier this year, at least 13 students at Eden Prairie High School were disciplined and many more questioned after pictures surfaced on social networking sites of students drinking alcohol—a violation of school rules.

**Michelle Davis (Moderator):** Welcome to today's chat with Conn McCartan, the principal of Minnesota's Eden Prairie High School, where more than a dozen students were disciplined earlier this year after evidence that they'd been drinking surfaced on social networking sites. We're also joined by Montana Miller, an assistant professor of popular culture at Bowling Green State University in Ohio who is an expert on the social networking site Facebook. They'll field calls about the promises and pitfalls of social networking sites in the context of schools. Let's start the discussion...

**Question from Lon Williams, U-46 Parent:** Why should school systems monitor student's behavior outside of school functions? This is a parent's responsibility. When schools get too involved in the parenting role, they become less inclined to participate as educators. It becomes easy enough for parents to think they don't have to deal with these issues when the school systems continue to drive the effort to monitor student behavior outside of the classroom environment.

**Conn McCartan:** I agree. We don't monitor these sites, we only react to what is given to us and only react to information that involves school or school activities.

**Question from Mrs. W, 6th grade teacher:** The use of language among my students is astonishingly vulgar, and this is encapsulated on their pages on these sites. How do we impress upon students that they are judged by what others see on these pages? How do we help them understand that disparaging remarks are just as disparaging on the internet as in person?

**Montana Miller:** This is a problem over which many of us agonize: how can we instill and cultivate empathy in young people? Is it possible to teach empathy to a kid who seem to lack the instinct for it? I don't know the answer, but it does seem that the increasing grip of technology on the traditions and trappings of childhood has served to erode the value of empathy in this generation. Perhaps children are not naturally any crueler than they have always been, but thanks to the web, the playground bully has become the cyberbully, inescapable on campus and off campus, intruding on children's lives through their home computers and their cellphones, inflicting terror across boundaries of campuses so that a harassed victim may no longer retreat simply by changing schools. I have remarked at times that the web's potential for personal slander goes far beyond the traditional graffiti on the bathroom wall--this is the bathroom wall on steroids. Victims, in turn, learn to retaliate with cruelty in this quasi-anonymous free-for-all. For example, the 13-year-old girl who recently committed suicide in Missouri after being taunted by a fake MySpace "boyfriend" had herself hurled insults at her online tormentors, to the dismay of her parents who were trying to monitor and protect their troubled daughter. It turned out the fake profile was a cruel hoax created by an out-of-control vindictive neighborhood mother, so lack of empathy isn't exclusively a problem of the youth generation. What has been called the "**online disinhibition effect**" is something I notice on web sites of all kinds, and I think it is important to keep insisting that we regularly take a moment's pause, halt the gush of online venting and verbal diarrhea, and imagine the effect that our words will have on the person who receives them through a computer

screen in another time and place. The current arsenal of anti-cyberbullying PSAs (public service announcements) emphasize that people tend to say things online that they never would in real life. But does it help to simply show examples of nasty cyberbullying in these ads? I think children and teenagers (and adults, for that matter) need to develop their skills of imagining the pain of others, and confronting the real consequences of the pain they can inflict thoughtlessly through their keyboards. In the same way, we need to insist they stop and pretend for a minute that they are an employer looking to hire someone trustworthy for their business, or looking for a classy person to pursue romantically. I think many Internet users are so caught up in the rush and the high of unlimited self-expression, they neglect to visualize the way their words will be received by the limitless audience on the other end of the transmission. In addition, this lack of etiquette (or “netiquette”) is seemingly contagious, and even a normally courteous person may get sucked into the “flame wars” that take place on discussion forums, especially forums where posters can remain anonymous. (To “flame” someone online is to launch a verbal attack, often unprovoked.)

**Question from Mike Hasley, Technology Instructor, Henrico County:** At what point should schools use MySpace to punish students? For example, if a teacher sees a student's MySpace page and he says he's going to skip a class, or did skip a class, should the teacher do something about it before it happens or after it happened?

**Conn McCartan:** I think our stance on what we do with information on social networking sites helps a school navigate this issue. We declare up front that we do not go out looking for information on social networking sites. We encourage our parents to do that. We do tell our students that we will investigate and take action on anything that is presented to us from a social networking site when it involves a violation of school or activity rules.

**Question from Mrs. W, 6th grade teacher:** How do we underscore the importance of monitoring student's use of these sites with parents, when the parents are non-English-speaking and might not realize the content that their students are posting?

**Montana Miller:** It sounds as though you have two chasms to leap over at once—the language gap and the generational gap that exists between those who are familiar and comfortable with Internet culture and those who are unfamiliar, skeptical, or intimidated by it. While the challenge of reaching the entire diversity of non-English-speaking parents is daunting, I have a couple of suggestions as to where you might begin. First, consider enlisting a couple of teenagers from these communities to act as “translators” of both language and Internet culture. Give them the privilege and honor of being the expert tour guides for an assembly to which you invite the parents (if possible, offering sessions at different times of day to accommodate parents' schedules). Frame the event primarily as a conversation about understanding and dialogue, not about warning the parents about the evils of their teenagers' extracurricular online pursuits. Second, Facebook just last week launched its Spanish version, followed by a French and a German version, and the site promises that in the near future it will be available in even more languages. The translation was done by active members of Facebook, through a collaborative method that reflects the ever-changing dynamic of this web community. The fact that one can now navigate the site in Spanish is a start, I hope, toward opening up the lines of communication with non-English-speaking parents.

**Question from Matthew Hejna, Program Specialist, Nassau BOCES:** Are you aware of any districts that have written policy to protect teachers from potential liability if their students were to post offensive/libelous materials on a social network site being used as part of a classroom lesson or project?

**Conn McCartan:** I am not. A few years ago some students here created a My Space site to look as if I had made it. Some of the doctored pictures and references were a bit off-color so it was pretty obvious I had not made it, but it is was a little un-nerving seeing something like that out there on the internet!

**Question from Eva Sigersted, senior at north canyon high school in phoenix, az:** I think that schools monitoring student behavior using social networking sites is almost an invasion of privacy because it is outside school grounds, and the issues discussed/posted by students are usually personal. Do you think there could be another social networking site specifically for school, so that anything posted on there is up for judgment by schools over the students' behavior? On current networking sites, students like to post personal things that sometimes do break the laws, but that is the right of the first amendment, even on the internet. If schools are able to monitor this for behavior, they are infringing upon students' space so that they don't feel safe to discuss whatever personal matter is on their mind.

**Montana Miller:** Again, I tend to doubt that students would voluntarily choose to use a school-monitored and sponsored social networking site rather than sites such as Facebook and MySpace where their expression is less restricted. You make an excellent point that in many cases, school administrators are claiming the power to punish students for what may be considered “off-campus” expression on web sites that are not officially affiliated with the school—Facebook and MySpace are independently operated, not sponsored by individual schools. **However, the boundaries of “on-campus” and “off-campus” expression are not the same as they were when the constitutional rights of public school students were affirmed in the landmark Supreme Court cases of Tinker vs. Des Moines, Bethel vs. Fraser, and Hazelwood vs. Kuhlmeier.** Based on these cases, students’ rights to free expression have depended on whether their speech occurred under the auspices of the school, and also whether the speech created a substantial disruption of the educational process. But today, we are in a completely new context of student expression, where rapidly advancing technologies have created an emerging field of legal issues. No one knows what the official rules are anymore. Students now access web content on their cellphones between classes, and the harassment that students and teachers alike may endure through the Internet can be so constant, inescapable, and un-erasable, that it pervades their existence and in effect does disrupt the educational process. It is important to challenge, also, your point that students use networking sites “to discuss whatever personal matter is on their mind.” Just as students’ rights to free expression need to be protected, students also need to be aware and responsible about the murky lines of “private” and “public” on the Internet. **If you are going to discuss personal issues on a web site that is accessible to the public, even a “limited” public, you should not complain about the consequences when someone reads what you posted.** Facebook has excellent privacy settings that can be activated in order to keep your personal details from the probing eyes of school administrators or any specific people you choose to “block.” But even so, students tend to be extremely cavalier about posting risky content without setting their profiles to “private,” and nothing posted online is truly 100 percent safe—a determined spy can often find some way to access confidential material. Students often learn painful lessons when they recklessly treat their web pages as personal steam valves, posting profane rants and explicit photos. (I see these things on my own students’ sites frequently, but I am not interested in judging them—as a professor of youth culture, I’m mainly just fascinated to learn more about what goes on in their lives outside the classroom.) As more and more adults are concerned and aware of these sites, the chances grow that your expression may reach an unintended audience, and you may find yourself off the team, or turned down for a job, or worse.

**Question from Bob Frangione, Educator, Lewisburg Area:** Would it not be somewhat less fraught with danger to establish school based teacher/student networks, rather than using established social networking sites which are, after all set up as a form of friendship?

**Conn McCartan:** Absolutely!

**Question from Coatesville School District:** This is not a question, but a comment on the value of MySpace. Our child got involved with the wrong crowd during her High School years. It was quite a difficult time for us to watch our child go from a happy child to a dark person. Mind you we understand that young people have to explore and grow and often test the elements and change, but what we had went beyond that and we often worried about her safety. By using MySpace we were able to find out things which would have definitely put herself in bad situations and were able to “conveniently” place ourselves so that she couldn’t get involved and put herself in a problematic or harmful situation. Does it infringe on her rights to privacy? Maybe. But, as long as we were supporting her and could possibly be liable for her actions, NO! Do we regret our decision to look on her MySpace or Facebook? NO! NO! NO! It did help get her out of harmful situations. We are glad and would do it again if the same situation came up again. Unless people were in the same position we were at the time, don’t point fingers and say what we did was wrong. It was done to help our child.

**Montana Miller:** I absolutely support parents taking a proactive supervisory role with their children’s online activities, especially with younger kids. For example, I often advise worried parents that setting limits on where and when kids may use the Internet is appropriate—I think allowing kids to spend unlimited time online, alone in their rooms, can easily be a recipe for disaster. There is plenty of effective software out there for parents who wish to monitor their kids’ Internet use—although savvy cyberkids will often outwit the adults, finding ways around the tracking software, and of course they may be accessing web sites on other people’s computers when they’re outside the home. In general, I urge adults to at least start from a position of respect and openness even when they are imposing restrictions on their kids. Try not to sneak around

and spy on them—be straightforward about the rules you're laying down, and ask them to show you how Facebook or MySpace works. Many kids are eager for more attention from parents, and they might just surprise you by being willing tour guides to this new social world that they navigate so comfortably. Approach the topic with curiosity and respect, not with suspicion and fear. Many parents are rightly concerned about the sexual predators that we all know (thanks to Dateline and other alarmist news reports) troll the web for vulnerable children. Yes, most kids do encounter sexual solicitations online. But your panicky reaction won't help—it will only make them afraid to tell you anything about their online experiences. Some web safety campaigns urge parents to make their kids sign a contract promising to tell their parents every time they receive inappropriate communication from someone online—but I think that's just setting families up for failure, because the kid is bound to break the contract within a few days if not hours. No reasonable kid is going to jump up from the computer every time an inappropriate comment flashes across the screen. Talk to your kids openly and firmly about your values, warn them about the dangers, ask their opinion of the frightening news stories about MySpace and Facebook...and you may well find you can trust them to protect themselves. The students I teach, who grew up in the new worldwide web wilderness, often tell me that most kids today know better than to respond to perverts online.

**Question from Denise J. Poole, NEA-Alaska UniServ:** Please address the pitfalls for staff, particularly if they are interacting on these web pages or even blogs with students outside of the school day on home/personal computers.

**Conn McCartan:** We have spoken to our staff about using the same guidelines they use for face-to-face social interactions with students when they think about social networking interactions. While we do not want to infringe upon speech rights, we have told them that professional guidelines would direct them to limit their electronic interactions with students to academic sites rather than social sites. Add to that the fact that every interaction is a permanent record that can be sent and re-sent to thousands of other people in seconds. **We have discouraged our staff from interacting with students on social networking sites.**

**Question from Ann Ewbank, Education Librarian, Arizona State University:** Students are not the only ones whose behavior has been monitored through social networking technologies. Recent cases (Tamara Hoover vs. Austin ISD is the most well known) reveal that teachers have been disciplined or even dismissed for content in a MySpace or Facebook profile. Where does public life end and private life begin for an educator, and how do 1st and 4th amendment rights apply in the age of social networking?

**Montana Miller:** That's a great question, and school law has always grappled with the question of whether teachers have a right to a personal life or whether they must act as representatives of the school 24 hours a day. The nature of their behavior--how public it is, that is--may determine whether they are punished for so-called inappropriate content or conduct. We should also consider, though, how the First Amendment can even be applied to the space of the Internet, which does not belong to any one country--the Internet is global, and someone can log in or access a site from anywhere in the world. These legal issues are incredibly tricky, and no one yet knows how it will all shake out--educators, lawyers, and scholars are all exploring this emerging area of law with much excitement and bewilderment! So far, there is no precedent for most of these cases that are arising with increasing frequency.

**Question from Connie Masson, Manager, Educational Technology, St. Vrain Valley School District:** What are the characteristics of a school district that is ready for unblocking social networks at school for student learning?

**Conn McCartan:** If I understand your question correctly, I don't think a district should unblock social networking sites for student learning. The very fact that they are social networking sites creates a mismatch for their use in academic endeavors. Given that there are electronic networking options that can focus on academic purposes (see an earlier answer), I would not rely on social networking sites to accomplish this.

**Question from Renee Smith, Curriculum Specialist USD 622:** Should parents request/require their child's password so they can monitor facebook accounts?

**Montana Miller:** I think the important thing is to have a respectful discussion with the child about what you feel is appropriate for him/her to be doing online. As teenagers grow older, they deserve a right to privacy, and parents monitoring their social

networking sites becomes increasingly intrusive. However, if a parent explains reasonably her worries and concerns, some kids are in fact willing to allow the parent to observe their profiles. Most kids, though, are likely to think of their Facebook profiles as similar to a private diary, and resist allowing parents to "spy." You might try asking your kid to help you set up your OWN Facebook profile! And then you just might find yourself surprised that your child might "friend" you...in which case you can observe all you like, with the child's implicit consent (until he/she decides to "block" you!).

**Question from William Cook Pre-Service Sierra Nevada:** Do you think it is appropriate to create a class page on these sites?

**Conn McCartan:** I don't. These sites are social networking sites and students see them in that way. There are several options available to teachers to create class pages for the sole purpose of academic exchange. Teachers in our school use "Moodle" to create forums for students to connect with the teacher for academic exchange. As a school system, we can control the content and security of these sites. You don't have that with social networking sites like Facebook.

**Question from Matt Campolmi, grad student, Texas A&M University:** You said that we need to teach our students how to imagine the pain they inflict on other people. It seems like we need to help students realize that they are in fact a part of community that is as diverse as it is populated. Shouldn't an online community that necessarily exposes kids to people they would not ordinarily met (different religions, ethnicities, sexual orientations, etc) help create a better sense of community--or, in the least, could it not be used to help create that sense?

**Montana Miller:** Yes, you would think so! But often, there is a paradoxical effect of this enormous range of potential connections online--people tend to gravitate toward small groups of people that share their particular interests, hanging out in narrowly targeted sites and groups and not actually engaging in dialogue with people who see things from different perspectives. While they may engage in heated discussions over politics or sports or hip-hop, they often do not really listen to each other--instead they rant and flame compulsively. While this isn't true of everyone, it is the general trend that I observe on many discussion forums and networking sites.

**Question from Kristina Leverty, Teacher, Century Junior High:** How have teachers used this positively, and keep it professional? Was this in class/during school use or outside of school? Have there been problems with the "walls" or comment areas? Have teachers logged in as individuals, school, department?

**Conn McCartan:** As I have said, our "Moodle" teacher sites have been very productive. Teachers post questions that students respond to and can see one another's thinking. Teachers can also check for understanding with a posted question and re-teach the next day if it looks like responses aren't connecting with the day's lesson. Some of our staff have hosted class forums such as this one on a class topic. They have found that there are students who do not contribute a great deal in class who really flourish in this environment.

**Question from Traci Kampel, Director of Communications, & Katy Yudin, Marketing Manager, BrainPOP:** What suggestions do you have for educational companies who want to reach and build online communities of teachers via social networking sites?

**Montana Miller:** Already, communities of teachers are doing a great job of finding each other through creating and joining myriad Facebook groups—some based at specific schools, and some "global" (extending across many schools and networks). Simply searching the term "teachers" brings up hundreds of different Facebook groups that boast hundreds of members—granted, the search results include many groups with titles such as "Best Ways to Piss Off Teachers," "Why Can Teachers Chew on Candy in Class While We Can't," "I Hate It When Teachers Erase the Board and Leave Half of a Word," "If I Fail It's My Teacher's Fault," and of course, "Teachers Need to Get the Hell Off Facebook." But you'll also find endless communities of teachers convening in groups such as "Primary Teachers—Resources, ideas, stress relief!" (23,000 members), "ESL Teachers in Korea," "Special Ed Teachers Rock," "National Council of Teachers of English," "Give Teachers More Pay," "Coolest Future Teachers of America," "Teachers—Sharing Ideas and Resources for the Classroom," "Geography Teachers of the World Unite," "African American Teachers Alliance," "Teachers Without Borders (TWB)," "Teachers College," "Piano Teachers Unite," "Kindergarten Teachers Unite!" and of course "Future Hot Teachers of

America." In my area, when a local school's teachers went on strike for better contracts, a Facebook group formed called "Students Support Maumee Teachers." Most of these groups are open to anyone, and they feature discussion boards and "walls" where members post questions and advice, videos, and links to useful teaching tools and resources. So Facebook already provides the vehicle to reach active, connected communities of teachers of every sort, and it is the meeting point for a vast range of people looking to find and share the kind of information you might provide.

Question from **Vanessa Van Petten**, teen blogger for [OnTeensToday.com](http://OnTeensToday.com), teen author "You're Grounded!": How do you believe social networks have changed the face and degree of cyber-bullying today?

**Conn McCartan**: As a high school principal, I haven't run into too much of this. As a parent, I can say that the stuff that used to happen in the park or the playground or on the phone now happens on line. It has just added another "place" where these exchanges can happen. Again, the issues are magnified by the fact that the exchanges are permanent and can be seen by so many people in such a short amount of time. I suspect upper elementary and middle school folks can say a lot more about this than I can.

**Question from Karen, Teacher, NYC High School**: I am a high school teacher in NYC and my seniors are creating a web site based on their own research. The topic of their research is directly related to the discussion here. Their question is: "Is MySpace developing new culture of young adults which in reality is altering people's social interaction skills?" Our survey showed that MySpace users are more apt to send a written message to a person through MySpace as opposed to using their phones or even talking face to face. We believe that users apparently show their dedication to "their pages" by the efforts they put into designing their pages, but we question as to how many other tasks do they equally distribute that same dedication to, including school work. MySpace has opened new venues to which many people feel comfortable doing just on these sites, but would never dare to do in person. Is this the new culture for the future?

**Montana Miller**: These are all terrific questions, and we probably won't know the long-term effects of how the changing norms of teenage social life will affect what kinds of adults they become. Will the next generation of adults be afraid to ask each other for dates, apply for jobs, and talk to groups in person? Sometimes I fear this may well be the case, as I notice my college students painfully shy about speaking in class, yet amazingly self-revealing on their Facebook and MySpace pages. Your students are researching a very important phenomenon, with enormous implications for how we all relate to each other as a society.

**Question from Traci Kampel, Director of Communications, BrainPOP**: Can sites like Facebook and MySpace be used in a POSITIVE way with kids and teachers?

**Conn McCartan**: Yes - in the same way that my interaction with a student at the mall or in church is positive. Educators run into students in social settings. They even plan social interactions with students. In these cases, they apply certain professional guidelines so that those interactions are appropriate and positive. The same things can happen on line. We have young teachers in our school who are digital natives. They are very comfortable interacting in this environment. Just as I have provided counsel to young teachers about face to face social interactions with students, I think they need to keep certain things in mind as they interact socially on line.

**Question from mark gil,teacher,ms326**: since we know students are using myspace and facebook could we ask them to think about positive uses for this technology in the classroom? Teleconferencing has allowed students to interface with kids from other parts of the world and states could the same be done with these social networking sites?

**Montana Miller**: I feel strongly that schools should not require students to use Facebook or MySpace for class purposes or assignments. When students join these networks, they post personal information on their profiles that they are just learning how to manage and control. The risks of their personal information being exposed to classmates and teachers through school-sponsored groups and projects is great, and with the many risks to personal privacy that kids typically run when they use these sites, mishaps are sure to occur. I would prefer that teachers NOT friend students, NOT require students to use Facebook or MySpace, and use only school-sponsored, "closed" sites for teleconferencing or class discussion forums, etc. For example, I require my students to use Blackboard for college courses, but I never ask them to be my friends on

Facebook, as I feel that would be subtly coercive and an invasion of their privacy. However, if they friend me voluntarily of their own accord, I always do accept, and many of them do so.

**Question from Karen Dular, CEO, EIN Technologies:** Would the teaching community accept a social site that was education-based and infused SEL principles? Are specific certification criteria required for the information to be accepted?

**Conn McCartan:** This may be where I start to venture into areas where I am speaking more from opinion than expertise . . . I think the idea of a social site which is educational based is an interesting combination. I just don't know if the two really mix well. Let me use this forum as an example. We are using an "interactive tool" to exchange ideas, but there are parameters built in to keep the interaction directed toward a particular purpose. Someone is managing the posts that come in to be sure they are appropriate both in terms of content and topic. Social sites don't do this. I think that makes it difficult to manage them so that they remain fundamentally educational in purpose.

**Question from Stacey Russo:** Have there been any studies done to show that these social networking sites such as facebook and myspace have been successful in reaching out to students in a positive way?

**Montana Miller:** I don't think so. Remember, these sites were not created so that adults could "reach out to students." They were created for students to reach out to each other! I think there is enormous ambivalence among the student population when it comes to adults being on Facebook at all, and the sense that this is THEIR territory is strong. Again, I feel it is intrusive when teachers request that students connect with them through these social networking sites--it's like inviting yourself to their parties. We are privileged to be friends with them on Facebook when they ask us--it is not a tool for us to try to get closer with them. That said, I have sometimes sent a message of support to a student whose "status update" indicates he/she is going through a difficult time. (However, I would NEVER contact a student via Facebook in order to ask why he/she was absent from class or didn't turn in a paper!)

**Question from Rob Chaney, education reporter, Missoulian:** My community recently experienced the suicide of a well-known high school student. Before she died, she text-messaged her intentions to many friends, and posted her plans on her MySpace page. This triggered a massive search as fellow students and parents tried to find her. How should schools and communities adapt to this kind of uncontrolled publication power?

**Conn McCartan:** My heart goes out to your community. These are some of the most difficult things a school can deal with. I suspect your school reacted in the same way it would have when this kind of information reaches them in any other way. A note is found, a friend expresses a concern. Information activated response and support networks in the school - no matter where it comes from. Schools adapt by accepting that they have the responsibility to respond to information that comes to them. It has certainly made our jobs more complicated - but how can you not do what your heroic school did in this case!

**Question from Paulette B. Smith, Internet Safety Facilitator, Chicago Public Schools:** Cyber bullying has become a serious issue at many of our schools, what are some effective "tried and true" strategies to combat this problem?

**Montana Miller:** This is a question we are all struggling with, and I don't think anyone has found real "tried and true" strategies yet. I guess I'd advise educators to take the issue seriously, and respond strongly and quickly to ANY harassment, whether online or offline. It is more difficult with the Internet context, because so many insults seem to be anonymous and impossible to track. However, administrators have a responsibility to investigate and punish when bullies are making life miserable for others. Students should definitely be encouraged to come forward and let teachers know when they are victims of cyberbullying, and teachers should not just brush it off by telling them to "just turn off the computer." That strategy does not seem to be effective, in a culture where so many of the kids are online so much of the time.

**Question from Pat Kennedy, teacher, New Oxford Middle School:** In addition to an Acceptable Use Policy for the Internet and network resources, what other policies should districts put in place?

**Conn McCartan:** I think I have tried to address some of this in other answers. I support policies that limit access to social sites at school. I support the use of academic network sites for student-teacher interaction. I support providing adults who work in school settings with guidelines for appropriate interaction with students on social networking sites.

**Question from Mara Dale, Mentor Teacher, Yosemite Institute & School Library student at Mansfield University:** Referring to Mrs. W's question, if I were to present a session on social networking sites to parents what would be the key points to cover (avoiding scare tactics & the fear factor)?

**Montana Miller:** Great question. When I talk to parents, I spend most of the time simply showing them what these sites are, what goes on there, how they work. I always find that most of the crowd is very unfamiliar with Facebook and MySpace, so I just give them a tour, using my own profile and a sample teenager's profile. I don't try to deny the fact that there is MUCH risqué behavior and content on these profiles (well, not posted by ME, of course!) and that they don't need to panic because of what they see, which at first may seem shocking. The thing is, when kids express themselves on these profiles, they are often experimenting, or engaging in communication with each other that happens in a special "frame." Adults have no way of accurately interpreting the meaning of all that is posted by kids online--they are bound to get it wrong, and make false assumptions. I encourage parents to ask their kids to show them how to make a profile--approach their kids as experts, not deviant delinquents who should be controlled and distrusted. Trust has to be a two-way street. Unfortunately most parents don't like what I am telling them--their main concern is how to completely control their children's online activities.

**Question from Frank Adsit, Technology Coordinator, Bolles School:** How can we bring a level of academic formality to social networking in schools? It almost seems that current students have become so "trained" toward informal SN'ing that getting them to "digdeeper" isn't possible

**Conn McCartan:** I think this is a great question! The vernacular of the social networking world doesn't translate well into the academic world. My kids send me text messages that cause me to bring home pizza when they really needed me to pick them up at school :) I will say that some of the content of on line interactions I have seen include some deep, profound thinking - and includes a lot of abbreviations! I suspect that educators need to continue to reinforce the standards of communication they expect in the setting they are using. If it is conversations, some informality is OK. If we are looking for complete sentences, we need to set that as the expectation.

**Question from Gwen, college administrator, chicago:** I have a facebook profile, as do many other faculty & staff. Mine is not robust and exists solely for me to gain access to our college's network & monitor "the wall" Since I am part of our network, students often invite me as "a friend" My colleagues & I have had many conversations about the appropriateness of being "Friends" with our students. What are most colleges doing? Not interacting seems rude, while too much interaction is inappropriate.

**Montana Miller:** I agree with you, Gwen! I do think it is appropriate and very good for college faculty and staff to use Facebook--it helps us better understand the lives of our students, which in this new media age are SO different from our own college experiences! When I read educators' discussion forums, I see a very wide range of approaches and "rules" about Facebook--some teachers use it liberally, while others are opposed to using it at all. For me, it is inappropriate to request that students be my friend, but I always accept their friend requests. I make this clear on the first day of class--this way they know that if I don't "friend" them it doesn't mean I don't like them, and they know that if they "friend" me they won't be rejected. I tell them I completely understand if they prefer not to friend me. I also think it is very, very important for faculty and staff to closely manage their profiles and keep sensitive content OFF there, deleting overly personal messages from the Wall, etc. On my profile, I do not talk about my own politics--I don't want students to feel I might be biased against them for their. I also keep profanity off my profile, and do not reveal personal contact information. Everyone needs to find a personal policy that fits their sense of integrity when it comes to personal interaction with students in general, and Facebook is just another realm in which we must negotiate that balance.

**Question from Leslie Raffelson:** As a teacher and a mentor, I am very involved with the students I have in class. I have a myspace page and keep in contact with these students outside of class. I have seen major benefits to the communication and relationships I can form with students using social networking. I am curious to see how teachers use it to expand and



extend the classroom outside of school. I find that the students I have and the ones that have added me to their 'friends' have become more responsible with their language and use of their pages. Maybe modeling good use of such sites has advantages.

**Conn McCartan:** I agree. It sounds like you have established some nice parameters for the kinds of interactions I have referred to earlier.

**Question from Max A. van Balgooy, Director of Education, National Trust for Historic Preservation:** Museums and historic sites are pursuing social networking as a way to reach students and other younger audiences, including creating profiles in Facebook and Myspace. Are there opportunities in social networking that we're overlooking? For example, can we use it to more actively engage students in historic sites, reach out to teachers, or provide a space where teachers and museum staff can discuss common topics or issues?

**Montana Miller:** I think most people use social networking sites to connect with friends and to "play," not so much to learn...but if you can find ways of delivering educational information in a way that feels fun, I think there is potential, especially if you develop some kind of application that draws people in. Such Facebook applications (special features people can choose to add to their Facebook profiles) include the Museum of Modern Art's project exhibiting digital art contributed by users; NBC Universal's Video Archives of African American History, which provides access to hundreds of video clips; and an application that lets you take a quiz to determine which American Folk Hero you most resemble. (Apparently I'm John Henry: "known for beating the steam hammer at hammering rail spikes, and holes into rock...loyal and hard working, expanding the railroads across the West, and saving the jobs of others. Unfortunately you died from a heart attack after defeating the steam-hammer."

**Question from Kim, consultant, parent:** Do you believe that teachers using social networking sites put themselves at higher risk for accusations of sexual misconduct?

**Conn McCartan:** I don't know if the fact that I use a site puts me at a higher risk. Certainly, I must be very clear in what I communicate as it forms a record of the conversation.

**Question from Matt Campolmi, Grad Student, Texas A&M University:** Is it necessary to use Facebook, Myspace, etc. to help make students culturally literate? Or is it more likely that these sites are a fad that students will outgrow?

**Montana Miller:** I don't think it is necessary; there are many varieties of cultural literacy, and time spent on Facebook is time NOT spent reading the newspaper, talking to people in person, etc. Usually, in my classes about 95 percent of the students are regular Facebook users--but I would never be able to identify those who aren't. However, I don't think these sites are a fad--I think they will only become increasingly complex, with more and more methods of accessing them. Last week I was climbing the Great Wall of China, over spring break, and my companions were updating their status on Facebook constantly through their BlackBerries!

**Question from Kyriakos Spanogiannis Teacher of English Athens Greece:** Internet is still in its infancy here, however students show a shrewd interest for the more titillating sides of it. How can we use social networking to promote interaction--that is what language is all about--avoiding the pitfalls their age involves?

**Conn McCartan:** I would refer you back to some of my earlier answers. See where your school could use internet networking to bring students together for academic purposes. Host a forum on a community topic. Digitally video tape a school presentation and post it for the community to view. As you mentioned, students are learning stuff on the internet - it just would be nice to provide some productive alternatives.

**Question from Elaine Plybon, Southern Methodist University:** Would it be more prudent to use a closed social network such as Ning than to use something available to the general public, like MySpace or Facebook? As an educator, it seems to me that a closed network is much more easily controlled and would reduce some of the liability risks associated with encouraging the use of MySpace or Facebook, while still establishing a social network for students and teachers to use. Collaborations with other schools could still be facilitated, as well.

**Montana Miller:** I wonder if you might be missing the point of how and why students use social networking sites. They use them to connect with the world, expansively and without restrictions imposed by their local adult authorities. I find it hard to imagine that the kids in your town would buy into the idea of a social network created exclusively for their limited community, controlled and promoted by the school that physically confines them by day. Facebook, MySpace, YouTube: these hugely popular sites represent the new realm of exploration, independence, virtual mobility, and creative expression for kids. I am skeptical about the prospect of young web users choosing to spend their time on a social network that is exclusive and censored rather than inclusive and largely unrestrained.

**Question from Nathania Johnson, Founder, SocialMediaButterfly.com:** A lot of the news about schools and social networking seems to focus on punishment and discipline? Why not provide incentives and rewards for students to encourage good behavior? For example, you could have a contest for the development of student-created social networks. Students could learn coding, marketing, and writing skills in the process. You could also have contests to see who can accomplish the most good (say, for a charity), with their social web pages. I think celebrating what is GOOD about social media is far better than focusing (and inadvertently promoting) the less-than-desirable things students do with social media.

**Conn McCartan:** I completely agree, and I love it when I see the rare media story that covers kids who raise money for Darfur through Facebook, or use the site to respond to tragedies in other parts of the country. It can be a great tool of connection for social good! Unfortunately, usually when reporters come to interview me about social networking sites, they don't want to hear the good aspects--they have already decided that their story is about the potential dangers, not the potential benefits.

**Question from Leslie Raffelson:** What are the positive ways some teachers have been using Myspace pages to reach students?

**Montana Miller:** Well, college professors can use MySpace pages as examples of performance of identity and shifting frames of interpretation, as well as analyzing artistic expression on the site. It can also be an interesting tool for observing cultural trends and phenomena, with the caveat that you really never know how authentic the information on MySpace is--it tends to be less connected to the "real" persona of the owner than Facebook profiles. It would surprise me if high school teachers were using MySpace to reach students, given the onslaught of panicky media stories about the many perverts and criminals that inhabit the site! I think most high school teachers would fear a backlash from parents, administrators, and even students who think teachers should stay away from "their space."

**Question from Elaine Plybon, Coordinator, SMU:** There is room in education for social networking sites. However, monitoring behavior doesn't seem like a practical use. In my opinion, leaving social networks to the private world they belong in is the way to go. Isn't the student's right to privacy an issue? If teachers would like to use social networking in the classroom, there are alternatives that can be made private so that only class participation is allowed. As a parent of five, I do monitor my children's MySpace profiles, but I don't think I would use information I gain from them to punish - only to be more aware. Thoughts?

**Conn McCartan:** I do the same thing as a parent. As a principal, we have told our community that we are not out there patrolling students' sites. If information is brought to us from these sites that shows school rules being broken (example: a picture of a student drinking on an over night school trip) we have told our community that we will investigate to determine school sanctions.

**Question from Edward Miller, Program Director, Alliance for Childhood and guest faculty, Sarah Lawrence College, Bronxville, NY:** To Professor Miller, Please comment on the methodology of the NSBA survey that is the subject of the EdWeek article "Social Networking Can Have Educational Benefits." Specifically, how reliable is an online survey of 9- to 17-year-olds asking them whether they discuss "education-related topics"? How exactly does this so-called finding constitute an "educational benefit"?

**Montana Miller:** Hmm! I haven't read that survey yet, Professor Miller. But I am laughing out loud (LMAO, in fact) at the vision of students responding to that question. Yes, I see students constantly discussing education-related topics on each

other's walls--how much they hate this or that class, how much homework they have to do, how many more days/hours/minutes till they are free from the prison of the classroom...

**Question from Karen Dular, CEO, EIN Technologies:** What concerns do the schools have regarding the security of social websites and student usage? Would schools welcome a login-restricted social website where student ID is confirmed prior to participation?

**Conn McCartan:** This is exactly what we have with the "Moodle" sites our teachers use. They are clear with students that they are for academic purposes.

**Question from Bobby Jenkins, Registrar:** Are colleges/universities utilizing facebook or myspace for recruiting purposes?

**Montana Miller:** Not that I know of. This would probably be considered crossing the line of propriety; I know there has been great controversy lately over whether coaches should be allowed to text message athletic recruits. In the same way, using the social space of Facebook as a tool for official purposes seems overly intrusive. I think this would apply to athletes as well as other students who might be recruited.

**Question from Cynthia Overton, TA provider, NCTI:** Are you seeing any evidence of online social networking being used to enhance social engagement of students with disabilities in mainstream settings outside of the classroom?

**Montana Miller:** Actually, yes--I have had many students with disabilities (mainly learning disabilities or extreme shyness and anxiety) tell me that without the tool of Facebook, they would feel isolated and disconnected from their peers, but that Facebook has smoothed the way for them to more easily meet people and make friends throughout college. Some people may feel that students with social inhibitions need to be forced to overcome them without the crutch of the Internet as mediator, but there is no denying that for many students, they experience the networks as essential to their sense of belonging in the community.

**Question from Mara Dale, Mentor Teacher, Yosemite Institute & School Library student @Mansfield University:** Recently on one of our discussion forms for MU's School Library & Information Technology program one of my classmates stated that her principal when interviewing a job candidate would not consider him/her if that person had a n active MySpace account. Besides being illegal, would you comment on teachers & social networking sites?

**Conn McCartan:** I can't imagine we would ever consider whether or not a person had a site as a criterion for employment. I am absolutely aware of organizations that visit candidates' social sites as they consider them for employment. The presence of the site doesn't determine anything - the content on it, might. One mistake young people make is to think that these sites are private - they are not! The content of a site is out there for folks to view and people will form opinions about them based on that content.

**Michelle Davis (Moderator):** We're going to end the chat now. Thanks to everyone for the great questions and to our guests for the thoughtful answers.