

ETHICS FROM WEB 1.0 to WEB 2.0

STANDING OUTSIDE THE BOX

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Several years ago, an English teacher came to the library to show me a student's poetry assignment. He was delighted with what she had done, even though she had deviated from the original assignment instructions. Instead of turning in a traditional term paper about the long-dead poet she was studying, Lydia had created a MySpace page for him. All the required assignment elements were there, from

the biographical information to the explication of his works. However, the MySpace product had elements a paper product did not. This poet had *friends*, among them Jean Paul Sartre, Emily Dickinson, T.S. Eliot, and someone called "2nd Period English." The poet also had messages from those friends, some commenting on his poetry, others just expressing their appreciation of the way Lydia handled the assignment.

When I look back on this incident now, I can't help but smile. Steve, the teacher, was—by today's sensibilities—naive in his reaction. Not only did he not fully understand the MySpace phenomenon, he was singularly unaware of its reputation as a tool *non grata* in education circles. Yet his response was exactly the right one if he wanted Lydia to engage in her subject and meet the learning goals of the

assignment. What would she have learned if Steve had given her no credit for the assignment or, worse, punished her for using what was commonly considered a prohibited resource? Since that semester, Steve has learned a great deal about MySpace, as well as a host of other web-based environments. Lydia, now in college, recently told me that she dropped her poet's page once it started getting "trashed" by unwanted comments and spam. But MySpace worked for her when she needed it to, and it made a big difference to her learning experience.

Does this story mean that I think all English teachers should incorporate the use of MySpace in their lessons? Absolutely not. But I think it does illustrate what can happen when the focus remains on learning. In today's schools and library media centers, emotion-laden concerns about new modes of information and communication technology can hijack our attention, even taking center stage. Something about the online revolution and, more recently, the advent of Web 2.0 tools and their ability to create connections among users, as well as between users and information, provokes feelings of fear and uncertainty. I believe this response distracts us from our fundamental mission to educate students and can sabotage our ethical obligations as librarians.

I'd like to address this topic on two fronts (1) the role of school library media centers in promoting reading and literacy, and (2) the role of school library media centers in teaching and learning.

The Role of School Library Media Centers in Promoting Reading and Literacy

Libraries that serve young people share certain core values. Among

these values are the provision of access to information, opportunities for literacy and personal growth, and places of refuge (both physical and virtual). A major challenge of the changing digital landscape is its presentation as a profoundly different environment, one that at first appears to be so alien it can even be construed as an entirely new entity. As a result, we run the risk of compromising our ability to understand how its tools might naturally contribute to those core values. Here is a concrete example. Virtually every school library media center in America provides a fiction collection as part of its mission to promote reading and literacy. Most of the titles in these fiction collections are not required reading, nor do they directly tie to the curriculum. Instead, they are made available for the sole purpose of encouraging reading for personal satisfaction. In similar fashion, most school libraries provide a selection of recreational magazine titles—*Hot Rod*, *Seventeen*, *Electronic Gaming Monthly*, and the like. As far as I know, *Seventeen* is never used in the classroom for instructional purposes, except for the occasional media or cultural literacy exercise. Again, this ephemeral material is provided to encourage students to develop regular reading habits.

The disconnect occurs when the same kind of free-choice reading material is accessed on the Web. Many schools routinely restrict Web access to material defined as "educational." In such settings, the student who can freely pick up an issue of *ESPN: The Magazine* from the library shelves is prohibited from going to the ESPN website on the library's computers. And the student who checks out *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* is prohibited from perusing J.K. Rowling's website or contributing stories to the Harry Potter thread on a fan fiction website. Whether wittingly

or unwittingly, the school's mission of promoting reading and literacy is somehow interpreted differently when the Web is the medium of delivery.

One common argument in defense of this practice cites the expense and scarcity of computer resources, making them too precious to squander on uses not associated with direct instruction. In fact, it is not unusual to see this "scarce resources" argument codified into a school's acceptable use policy. The prevailing attitude is that students can look at sports scores and edit their Facebook pages on their own (non-school) time. I would venture to guess, though, that even in an ideal environment of ubiquitous and inexpensive computing and connectivity, most schools would still restrict Web use to the narrowly defined educational rubric. The rationale at this juncture focuses on the unbounded nature of the Web—the ease with which students can start by visiting the ESPN website and then quickly roam into unmonitored Web territory. After all, the library's print materials have been professionally selected for age appropriateness, among other criteria. In contrast, the Web is an amalgam of anything and everything, including content that no rational person would construe as being suitable for young people. On the other hand, if one is to truly honor librarianship's core mission of promoting reading and literacy, it is important to acknowledge that the Web—particularly for today's students—is analogous to a library's bookshelves in the way it accommodates browsing and discovery. The Web is very much the "reading" milieu that today's generations live and breathe (Rich 2008).

Ironically, these observations about access are not even about Web filtering software, which, in theory, screens out the undesirable content.

Instead, my concern centers on plain old access to material that is not, strictly speaking, directly related to what is going on in the classroom. Harkening back to our core mission, the Web can be (and maybe must be) regarded as another opportunity for us to help young people develop a lifelong habit of reading. As with other reading materials we offer to students, this reading environment needs to be supported with finding tools, lessons in comprehension and interpretation, and other instructional services that scaffold students as they learn to make intelligent and responsible uses of online information.

The Role of School Library Media Centers in Teaching and Learning

The previous section of this article primarily describes issues that are situated within an “old” Internet context, “Web 1.0,” in which users engage with the medium as they would with a book, a movie, a sound recording, etc.—that is, reading, watching, and listening. In the school setting, the stakes rise even further when the discussion turns to Web 2.0, an environment in which users interact with the medium, create new content, and engage directly with other users. What role can Web 2.0 tools have in a school’s core mission of educating students? If these tools indeed have a role (and, obviously, I think they do), what factors stand in the way of their implementation? Ignorance about the nature of Web 2.0 tools is most certainly a factor. Social tools are often prohibited as a class because they conjure up notions of opening the school doors to Web predators or, at the least, enabling the teenagers-gone-wild behavior depicted so

frequently in the media. “Social networking” becomes synonymous with posting compromising photos on MySpace, when it could just as easily mean sharing reading preferences on LibraryThing. In many schools, any website that has “blog” in the URL or its name is off limits. Photo sharing sites like Flickr don’t stand a chance. Even closed networks like a Ning or an invitation-only wiki might be blocked. School administrators may simply not understand what the tools are and how they can be used in school settings. Many rely heavily on the judgment of technology coordinators who have (not unjustifiable) concerns about

for the sole purpose of academic exchange. Teachers in his school use Moodle, a self-contained course management system, to create forums for students to connect with them. Other educators, however, have found great value in using more open Web 2.0 tools in their teaching, even those that have at least the potential to connect to a world outside the virtual boundaries of school walls. A couple of years ago, our school’s student newspaper went to an online format <www.uni.uiuc.edu/gargoyle>. In addition to the fact that restrictions on length and color printing ended and stories could be added daily, readers could comment on individual stories. This

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safety and security issues or, in some cases, the loss of central control that Web 2.0 tools imply.

If a total ban is inappropriate, should schools simply open the gates? Does it make sense for teachers to establish a class presence on a social networking site or assign work that takes advantage of such environments in the way our student Lydia did? Maybe not. Conn McCartan, principal of Eden Prairie (MN) High School, notes that Facebook and MySpace are social networking sites and students see them in that way (EPE 2008). He advocates the use of other online services that are designed

last enhancement profoundly affected the way student reporters thought of their work and even the way the rest of the school thought about the newspaper. People outside school *did* (and do) comment on the stories. Though it became clear early on that comments must be moderated by the journalism teacher, the functionality

has been well worth any trouble, as has the reach to a seemingly infinite audience. The paper now has an RSS feed and a presence on Twitter <<http://twitter.com/onlinegargoyle>>, allowing student reporters to immediately push updates to subscribers.

Many other schools are finding similar benefits in employing Web 2.0 technologies. Examples are becoming much easier to find, frequently made visible through 2.0 sites like “Educational Wikis” <<http://educationalwikis.wikispaces.com>>, which features a long list of links to existing course-based wikis. For those who still have doubts,

school librarian and Web 2.0 maven Joyce Valenza started a wiki called “Top Ten Reasons for Using 2.0 in Learning” <<http://toptenreasons.wikispaces.com>>, seeding it with links to examples, tools, and standards. District technology director and über-blogger Doug Johnson posted “A List O’ Lists,” leading readers to collections of educational Web 2.0 resources <<http://doug-johnson.squarespace.com/blue-skunk-blog/2008/4/29/a-list-o-lists.html>>.

It is important to select 2.0 tools with care. Many young people are likely to agree with McCartan’s assessment regarding the differences between more personal social networking sites and those created for academic purposes (EPE 2008). In fact, attempts by teachers to engage students through “cool” social networking tools may backfire. At the college level this response is known as the “creepy treehouse” phenomenon. One definition provided by instructional designer Jared Stein (2008) is as follows: “Any institutionally-created, operated, or controlled environment in which participants are lured in either by mimicking preexisting open or naturally formed environments, or by force, through a system of punishments or rewards.” Furthermore, these situations tend to involve an authority figure who is forcing subordinates into social or quasi-social situations, using peer social networks in which the partners are not true peers. Indeed, what could be less desirable than being *required* to interact with a teacher on Facebook, when you, the student, have not initiated that contact? On the other hand, students who engage in traditional educational activities (such as quizzes and asynchronous course-related discussions) using online systems like Moodle are less likely to feel discomfort because those environments are so distinctly

separate from personal social networks. Even so, some students may be turned off by teachers who assume all learners like such activities simply because they are online and have some social characteristics.

Fear Factor

In reality, teachers in K–12 schools are unlikely to start requiring students to “friend” them any time soon because popular social networking services are blocked in most schools. Principal McCartan defends this status quo, making the following comparison to Moodle: “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” (EPE 2008). True enough, particularly for services that are created for the purpose of enabling members to expand their personal networks, as well as strengthen existing relationships. The very premise of Facebook and MySpace is that my friend’s friends are likely to be of interest to me, as are those people’s pursuits and connections. On the other hand, many Web 2.0 tools do offer significant levels of local control and are not all about social networking for its own sake. Services can generally be password-protected, comments can be screened, Web filter settings can be calibrated instead of accepting default settings. But it often seems that the mere *potential* for students to go beyond the assumed safety of virtual school walls is enough to globally shut out access to these tools.

Mary Ann Bell (2007) attributed this shutout to fear on the part of school districts and school boards in response to media hysteria over online pornography, Web predators, and cyberbullying. However, the fearmongering is often based on ignorance about the tools and lack

of data about the consequences of their use. Recent research provides a more realistic portrayal of how young people are actually using these technologies. One such study, conducted under the auspices of the National School Boards Association (2007), consisted of three surveys distributed to students aged 9–17, parents, and school district leaders. Among the findings, the NSBA reported that both students and parents experienced fewer problems, such as cyberbullying and unwelcome personal encounters, than school fears and policies seemed to imply. Only 0.08 percent of students surveyed said they had actually met someone in person without their parents’ permission; 7 percent reported experiencing cyberbullying. At the same time, the vast majority of these students were involved in social networking activities, content creation, and online discussions about education. NSBA recommends that schools reexamine their social networking policies: “Safety policies remain important, as does teaching students about online safety and responsible online expression—but students may learn these lessons better while they’re actually using social networking tools” (NSBA 2007, 11). In other words, educators would do well to address use of these tools *within* the school setting for safety reasons, as well as for pedagogical purposes.

A study conducted at the Crimes against Children Research Center at the University of New Hampshire offers even more compelling evidence that social networking sites pose far less danger to young people than is often assumed (Wolak et al. 2008). The researchers found that young people who use social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace are unlikely to be increasing their risk of being targeted by online predators. The reality is that typical predators are adult men who are quite open



about their interest in sex and employ more direct online communication methods such as e-mail, instant messaging, or chat rooms. Rather than posing as young people and abducting their victims, these perpetrators develop connections with susceptible teens who see the relationships with adults as romantic adventures. Teens that are most vulnerable to online predators have histories of sexual or physical abuse, come from dysfunctional families, and have a tendency to take risks in both their online and offline lives. Boys who are gay or who are questioning their sexuality may also be more susceptible to online predators than other teen populations. It is not hard to imagine that disaffected teens would turn to the Web, particularly if they are unlikely to find support in their existing networks, “real” or virtual. The researchers recommend that prevention efforts focus on finding ways to reach these vulnerable teens, since many do not have good relationships with their parents.

Ethical Obligations

With an improved understanding of how young people use social networking sites and how Web 2.0 tools can enhance education, we are in a much better position to consider implementation issues in a dispassionate manner. In doing so, we can address several professional issues that I believe now assert themselves as ethical obligations. First, in today’s digital world, engaging students in conversations about the ramifications of their use of digital technologies must be considered one

of the core responsibilities of the school library media specialist. Certainly school librarians are not the sole educators responsible for teaching ethical and responsible use of information and communication technologies, but we must be key players. Librarians have traditionally addressed the responsible use issue through lessons on plagiarism and copyright. As the lines between information and communication blur, the scope of these lessons easily extends to other online behaviors, from website evaluation to cyberbullying.

Here is another example. The routinely-available (and costly) online databases subscribed to by school libraries allow students to e-mail articles to themselves. If e-mail is allowed in school, even if only to take advantage of this functionality, then it is a topic we must address with students in some fashion. The alternative is to disallow use of the function, miss out on a useful benefit of an expensive resource, and, more importantly, to ignore how our students learn, work, and communicate. This example also illustrates how the lines between school and home are blurring. We know students use e-mail outside of school, for both personal and educational purposes. I am not sure that we can afford to *not* teach a skill that can be used effectively in learning contexts, even if we are ambivalent about its use within school walls.

Already overwhelmed library media specialists may find this “new” charge to be a daunting prospect. How is it possible to add yet another task to our lengthy list? First, it helps to understand what is *not* necessary to take on and, in fact, may be ineffectual if overemphasized. Schools that focus solely on the fear of Web predators risk losing their audience. Teens sense that the stranger-danger fear is sensationalized and

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overblown, even without being aware of the recent research on predator behavior (because they know their own behavior). Safety should certainly be a piece of any responsible use curriculum, but should not predominate. Next, find ways to integrate responsible use instruction into the fabric of ongoing information literacy efforts. Start by learning about social tools and how they can be used effectively in the learning process and with existing course content. As always in teaching, there is a right tool for a right use. Sometimes the right tools will be pencil and paper, sometimes spreadsheets and databases, sometimes blogs and wikis. Make choices based on the appropriateness of the tool in meeting the learning goal. Then, weave ethics learning into application of the tool in the curriculum, rather than making ethics a standalone (and, therefore, add-on) lesson.

Educators know that just because a lesson is taught does not mean that its meaning is understood and internalized by learners. This gap is especially noticeable in any kind of behavior or character-building instructional endeavor. Students may be able to parrot back rules for ethical and responsible use of information and communication technologies (and thereby get an "A" on the ethics test), but still behave otherwise. In spite of the benefit of their instruction, "A" students might continue to download copyrighted music, torment one another online, and otherwise misuse online resources. Cognitive and developmental factors dictate that young people will always test their boundaries. In sum, pedagogical efforts are only one part of the equation. Policies, rules, and consequences are also important to maintain and enforce, along with efforts to educate, building rigorous discussion into the process. Above

all, access to the tools should not be denied simply because it is inevitable that the rules will be broken. Instead, it is essential to keep the conversation open, take advantage of the teachable moments, and demonstrate to students that school rules and limitations are the result of thoughtful consideration.

Finally, educators must themselves be ethical in their use of Web 2.0 tools. It is important to respect students' personal privacy by not trolling their virtual spaces. Let them "friend" you if you like, but don't be the one to initiate the contact. In other words, don't build a creepy treehouse.

Let the library be a library again. Open access has always been a core value of librarianship. The digital age should not suddenly cause us to lose perspective simply because the content arrives in a different format or may lead readers into uncharted territory. It is important to take a close look at our filtering policies. Who is making the decisions about what to filter? Are we filtering specific classes of content for reasons that truly make sense in terms of a library's mission to promote reading and literacy? We should also ask ourselves if we are artificially bisecting students' reading lives along home and school lines, and absolving ourselves of the responsibility to deal with the huge realm of information intake that occurs outside school walls. Instead, a proactive approach is likely to be much more effective. We can use our considerable skills to provide students with the guidance and the tools that can help them make intelligent choices and understand what they encounter in a powerful new environment.

This brave new world is still driven by the core values that define our profession. Our challenge is to use its new capabilities to further our mission in meaningful and lasting ways.



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