A New Face for Schools

Harnessing the power of social networks can be a key to student—and district—success

Laura Lefkowits

Choice is ubiquitous in our lives. From on-demand TV programs to music downloads to "fast" gourmet restaurant chains that let customers build their ideal burrito, we like "having it our way."

This trend toward using technology to support individualization and customization has been immersing itself in our culture for the past decade, along with fears that such technologies would isolate us from one another, severely restricting face-to-face communications. Now, however, our fears are subsiding as another trend emerges — the rise of dozens of new voluntary communities, or social networks, that are bringing us together in unique, technology-driven ways.

Ask students about social networks, and they'll tell you that, whatever their geographic locale, they are a mere breath away from each other on Facebook. They regularly negotiate sales of everything from video games to car parts on eBay, prefer to share vacation memories and weekend photos on Flickr, and of course, create their alter-egos on MySpace.

The participation and active contribution of users is what makes these networks powerful, "purposeful communities." My organization, the Denver-based Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL), believes these communities can have a powerful effect on student achievement in our 21st century schools.

How 'purposeful communities' work

In their work on school leadership, McREL researchers identify "purposeful community" as a critical component of successful education systems. In K-12 education, this community includes students, parents, teachers, school staff members,

central office administrators and support personnel, the school board, other social agencies, and businesses.

A purposeful community has the collective ability to develop and use all available assets to accomplish purposes and produce outcomes that matter to all community members. Members come together to accomplish outcomes that individuals could not accomplish on their own, such as increasing graduation rates or reducing absenteeism.

Purposeful communities use both tangible assets (such as media centers and textbooks) and intangible assets (such as parent involvement and community support) to achieve their purposes. They also have agreed-upon processes for working together, which include both articulated and tacit operating principles governing their interactions.

These processes ensure the viability of the community and increase the likelihood of meeting shared goals. Finally, purposeful communities exhibit a sense of collective efficacy; they really do believe that together they can make a difference.

Compare the characteristics of a purposeful community to many social networking tools and you find many similarities.

The power of social networks

Social networking sites are established for a specific purpose and depend on users adhering to agreed-upon processes to achieve common goals and to self-regulate on behalf of the community's interests. On Facebook (www.facebook.com), for example, you may only view another's profile if you have been "friended" by that person. This promotes a level of privacy with which all users are comfortable.

Most sites also have mechanisms that allow community members to flag posted items that they believe are inappropriate or outside the terms of use. For example, on the free classified advertising site, Craig's List (www.craigslist.org), users looking for a new home can select a list of houses for sale by owner or a separate list for sale by agent. If an unscrupulous agent lists a house in the "for sale by owner" section, an observant user can flag the item, warning fellow users about the infraction. When an item receives a certain number of flags, it is pulled from the site.

Most "terms of use" statements do not specify each and every possible infraction warranting a flag. Rather, it is up to users themselves to set the standards and, over time, each virtual community develops its own set of tacit agreements and operating principles to guide its online behavior.

Perhaps the most powerful similarity between social networking and purposeful communities is the notion of collective efficacy. Writers such as Howard Rheingold and James Surowiecki have discussed the power inherent in online communities. Rheingold coined the term "smart mobs" and Surowiecki identified this phenomenon as the "wisdom of crowds." One only has to look at the impact of the Internet on the fundraising abilities of our presidential candidates to understand the strength inherent in a community of like-minded people joining together in a virtual world to support a shared goal.

And how can anyone deny the sense of collective efficacy at play this past March, when hundreds of California high school students, responding to text messages, walked out of school to protest budget cuts made by the school board that very morning? Students, particularly angered over the 50 percent cut to the sports programs, gathered at the high school and walked to the district offices carrying hastily prepared protest signs.

Ultimately, the students were invited to meet with school officials to discuss the possibility of initiating a ballot issue to raise funds for the sports program.

Social networking, school improvement

Could Facebook be a model for a 21st century purposeful student community designed for school improvement? Possibly, but evidence suggests that education is not prepared to accept the dimension of purposeful communities offered by social networks.

In its 2007 report *Creating & Connecting*, the National School Boards Association revealed that 96 percent of students with online access spend nearly as much time using social networking technologies as watching television — nine hours and 10 hours respectively each week. Moreover, more than half of the respondents indicated that they use social networking tools to talk about education and collaborate on school projects, yet associated interviews with district leaders revealed that most K–12 school systems have strict rules against nearly all forms of online social networking while at school.

What's wrong with this picture?

Perhaps we should take a lesson from our students. They are, in fact, organically forming purposeful communities throughout cyberspace every day. Rather than restricting the most highly engaging form of communication and community-making available to students, what if schools embraced this technology and made use of its natural educational advantages?

True purposeful communities are composed of students, parents, teachers, and many others. Together, stakeholders' contributions to school improvement strategies could grow exponentially and virally in the same way one adds friends on Facebook. Imagine what the next generation of schools might look like when they are led by today's students, whose lives are filled with choice and whose communities are inherently purposeful. ■

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