

Adventist Education and the Facebook Face-off

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Technology has ushered in a new way of socializing. On a large scale, droves of young people are complementing their everyday face-to-face relationships with cyberspace interaction mediated by such websites as *Facebook*, *MySpace* and *YouTube*. Even Seventh-day Adventist students are riding the wave of this phenomenon known as social networking, forming extensive linkages and communities on the World Wide Web. Recognizing that this rapid speed of communicating is not about to slow down any time soon, and that the Internet presents a paradox between positive exposure/responsible use and negative exposure/irresponsible use, Adventist educators must consider whether to embrace social networking as a tool for learning or, like many of our educational counterparts, ban its use in our schools.

As teens, many of us spent hours on the telephone with our friends rehashing the day or planning for weekend activities. Our students--still social creatures looking for friends, acceptance and fun--use social networking websites to do that and a whole lot more—possibly too much more. Social networking links people to each other on the Internet creating linkages of interdependency amongst the participants who share information, values and ideas, and even develop new knowledge for those who are a part of the links. The shape and size of the network helps determine its usefulness to the individuals who form it. Online users interested in a particular linkage or group could be invited to join the network or join voluntarily. Some groups require users to apply for membership which is not always guaranteed.

On the positive side, social networking websites offer a myriad of possibilities for a creative Seventh-day Adventist teacher who might be inclined to their use. For example, teachers may use these sites as a vehicle for communicating with their students to answer homework questions, check on students who miss school and update their students on missing assignments. Some teachers work with their students within these online communities to share original creations of power-point presentations, poetry, stories, music and video. The Internet allows students to interface with other students from around the globe, creating a rich and diverse community of learners. Students also have the opportunity to form a network to collaborate, brainstorm, draw, and conduct surveys to share valuable information. They are able to create new knowledge within these communities. This technology adds to the rich and unique body of knowledge which is the Internet.

While Adventist schools may afford students the benefits associated with social networking, they must also be aware of the dangers associated with the technology. Dangers such as internet bullying and child pornography have caused many schools, both private and public, to prohibit their students from having access to these sites. The result has been described as censorship of what might otherwise be a valuable tool for learning—and rightfully so.

In their attempt to protect the interest of students, many of these schools have received considerable media coverage. These schools have also had to face the disdain of freedom of information advocates who question the school's right to ban students from accessing social networking websites. And though many responsible students use these sites in positive ways, some have used such sites to post nasty and retaliatory messages aimed at their school, their teachers and their peers. Internet bullying via these sites has forced many schools—particularly public schools--to take a hard look at social networking sites such as *Facebook* and *MySpace*.

Compounding the issue is that many pedophiles and predators recognize that social networks are a ripe haven for unsuspecting children and teenagers. It stands to reason that social networking sites are only as good as the individuals who join them. Many websites permit anyone to view the posted profiles, and many unsuspecting youth make the mistake of including personal information and pictures as part of their profile. Many of these youth become vulnerable targets who can be easily traced outside of cyberspace.

Schools cannot leave themselves open to unnecessary criticism and potential lawsuits as a result of students who fail to act responsibly while on the web. Neither can they afford to jeopardize the safety of their students. Educators must take this responsibility seriously and avoid the risk of exposing students placed in their care, to questionable and otherwise objectionable content.

In addition to these safety concerns, school administrators cite less productive times and the need for a more focused academic atmosphere as reasons for their ban on Internet Social Networking Sites. In addition to spiritual, social and physical development, the focus on academic development is the core thrust of Seventh Day Adventist Education. It would be preferable to avoid any form of technology which might negatively affect a child in any of these developmental areas. Social networking is no exception.

While there is a wide body of research to support computer mediated technology and its positive effect on human relations, there is evidence to refute it. Opponents of computer mediated technology argue that communication through the medium of a computer is superficial. They claim that when we use our computers to communicate with people we cannot see their facial expressions, hear the sound of their voice or witness the non-verbal cues we interpret to get the full scope of what they are trying to tell us.

Could social networking impact the natural and genuine patterns of face to face communication which God has given us? This and many other unanswered questions are worthy of further research.

Social Networking is the latest craze in the advance of technology and neither will it be the last. As the technology evolves, our young people will continue to be attracted to it. After all were young people not attracted to the television when the technology first made its debut many decades ago?

There is no doubt that computer mediated communication is here to stay. In fact, I am convinced that the technology will advance in such a way it will continue to alter the way we communicate with each other. The Society for the Advancement of Technology predicts that “telecommunications technology will experience more change in the next five years than occurred over the past 95” (Graham Molitor, 2003).

Contributing to this prediction will be advances in transmission rates, supercomputer speed, artificial intelligence, satellite communications, wireless and mobile communication devices, broadband digital technologies, and Internet resources.

To mitigate the ugly side of social networking effectively, both the home and the school should work cooperatively to teach our children how to use the technology responsibly. Responsible use and the consequences of non-compliance must be reinforced. While access to Facebook might be limited at school, our students can and will access it from home or elsewhere.

In combating the undesirable effects of the Internet, we must teach our students to become critical evaluators of what they view and hear. This skill will help them separate the tasteful from the grotesque, when faced with ethical and moral decisions in cyberspace.

Resources:

- Johnson, Steven. (1997). *Interface culture: How new technology transforms the way we create and communicate*. San Francisco: Harperedge.
- Mighty, I. (June, 2006). *The Paradox of Computer Mediated Technology on Human Relations* for Kristen Olson, Faculty of Education, University of Manitoba.
- Molitor, Graham, T.,. (June, 2003). *Communication technologies that will change our lives*. USA today.
- Sanders, Christopher, E. (Summer, 2000). *The relationship of Internet use to depression and social isolation among adolescents*. www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m2248/