

# THE SOCIAL DIMENSION

You can't fight the seductive power of Facebook over your students, insists Miles Berry, so why not turn it to an educational advantage instead?



**T**eaching for learning is about meeting pupils where they are and taking them to a place they wouldn't have reached otherwise. But how good are we at this when it comes to the sprawling resource that is the internet? Whether we like it or not, for a large proportion of our students, the place where they are online is Facebook – and yet few schools make any use of the site in or out of the classroom.

Ofcom's report, UK Children's Media Literacy, found that 79% of 12-15 year olds in 2010 had an active social network profile, with 96% of these on Facebook. There are, as with cycling and swimming, risks associated with social networking, but by and large we've done a good job of educating young people how to keep themselves safe online. Most do seem savvy when using Facebook: keeping profiles private or semi-private and socialising online only with those they know already. That

said, whilst the majority of young people have the technical skills and basic awareness needed to negotiate Facebook in safety, far fewer employ it as creatively, effectively or critically as they might; more engagement by teachers and schools here could well make a valuable difference.

Those who've watched 'The Social Network' will know that Facebook's origins lie within education, with membership originally restricted to students at Harvard and then other Ivy League universities. The social dimension of school is particularly important: it's where we learn how to get on and work with others; peer pressure can be a force for good or ill; and indeed, many of our own Facebook friends are likely to date back to when we were at school ourselves. The importance of personal learning networks at university and in employment suggests that the skills and understanding >



necessary to make the best use of these are ones that might usefully be developed at school.

The 'anytime-anywhere' promises of online learning are made good by social networking sites – with many users logged in almost continuously, the opportunity to bounce ideas to and fro is ever present. Integration with phones and tablets is usually very slick; because there's always 'an app for this', social networking, and thus social learning, isn't limited to the institution, the desktop or laptop.

## Network solutions

There are many ways in which schools and teachers might make more, and better, use of social networking for education. First, it's well worth conducting a survey or having a few conversations about how students are already using Facebook and similar sites. As well as getting a sense of the extent to which students are keeping themselves safe online and thinking about their responsibility for their online profile, you can judge how they're already using their networks to support their learning and perhaps even developing a critical understanding of social technology.

At a simple level, your school might set up a Facebook Page, using this to keep those students, parents and teachers who 'like' it informed of news, as well as gathering feedback, sharing photos and maintaining a calendar of events. Whilst this can all be done via a conventional school website, having updates from school in stakeholders' news feeds might provide a more immediate experience. It's best to see this as the public face of the school, but going further and using a Facebook Group rather than a Page allows more control over who gets to see and contribute to what's posted.

Whilst teaching unions and others advise against teachers becoming Facebook 'friends' with their students, and indeed many students might have their own concerns about their wall posts and photo albums being viewed by teachers, Facebook Groups allow both teachers and pupils to use the platform to communicate and collaborate without having access to one another's more personal or private content. These can work very well for a class, for example, with teachers acting as the group admin, inviting only a particular cohort as members. The Group then becomes the online learning space for the class, much like a VLE, with the teacher uploading files, sharing links to resources, continuing



classroom discussions online, running quick-quiz polls etc, with updates going directly into users' news feeds.

Using Facebook in school is not without difficulties. Those that do make the move might need to have their filtering settings changed to allow access to at least some bits of Facebook from inside school. Schools and teachers should consider carefully trusting student level data to any third party, particularly where this might be used to help target advertising. Unlike Zuckerberg, many teachers, and perhaps a lot of students, might feel a degree of discomfort using the same environment, if not the same spaces in it, for personal and academic purposes. Furthermore, Facebook's terms and conditions prohibit those under 13 from setting up an account, due to US COPPA legislation.

## You can go your own way...

Alternatives to Facebook, purpose built with education in mind, do exist. Edmodo has a substantial user base in UK schools; it provides a Facebook-like social networking platform with additional tools for teachers to set and mark assignments and online quizzes. Schoology is a similar system, better known in the US than UK, with some useful analytic tools and a rather nice integration with Google Docs, which would be useful for schools that have already made that move. Edmodo are committed to offering their basic service for free, with Schoology offering a 'freemium' model, charging schools for access to their more advanced admin tools. Some VLEs include social networking tools too, although these are rarely as smooth as dedicated solutions.

It's possible to do all this and more in-house, keeping all data inside the school's own 'walled garden' for free, although this requires a little technical expertise and more time. Elgg is an open source social networking engine that will run very happily, and securely, on an Apache web-server, although there's quite a learning curve to climb with this. For schools that are already making use of pupil and teacher blogs, the BuddyPress extension to Wordpress provides another approach, and multi-purpose content management systems like Drupal have all the plug-ins you'd need to build your own social networking platform.

Whichever approach you take, acknowledging the social dimension to learning, both offline and online, is well worth the effort – yes we learn through experience and from resources, but we discover and absorb so much more through the conversations we have about these things.



## ABOUT THE EXPERT

MILES BERRY IS A SENIOR LECTURER AND SUBJECT COORDINATOR FOR ICT EDUCATION AT ROEHAMPTON UNIVERSITY. HE IS ALSO CHAIR OF THE BOARD OF MANAGEMENT AT NAACE, THE ICT ASSOCIATION.

## WHO DO THEY THINK YOU ARE?

Facebook's founder, Mark Zuckerberg, is clear about online and offline identity being no different, with a real names policy being essential to the Facebook experience. Thinking through issues of identity and its presentation is not an easy thing for students, for whom there are often tensions between the persona they might present to their friends, their family, their teachers and those they know less well. Social networks that allow control over the groups with whom content might be shared, provide one way of looking at issues of identity and its expression. Students ought to bear in mind the implications of a persistent, permanent online identity for their future study, work and social lives.