



**LESSONS
FROM THE
VIRTUAL
REALITY OF
TEENAGERS**

ENTER THE TEENAGE WORLD

of MySpace, Facebook and other social networking Web sites, and you might be shocked at what you'll find.

Never before have the angst and the drama of adolescence been so public. Discussions formally confined to the sanctity of the locked diary, the intricately folded note or even the locker room are now available to anyone with an Internet connection.

But once you get past the poor spelling, ramblings and crass subject matter, you'll see clues that indicate something fascinating. Blog entries are posted daily, and entries receive feedback from friends. Complex photo slide shows are set to music and posted to profile pages. They might not realize it, but adolescents are spending hours each day reading, writing and creating online content.

What if educators tapped into that energy?

by **Kate Johanns**





LESSON

1

Modern adolescence is lived online

Observation alone will tell you that teenagers are extremely wired, but consider these facts from the Pew Internet and American Life Project: 87 percent of teenagers use the Internet, compared with 66 percent of American adults. More than half of teenagers are “content creators”—they remix content they’ve found online, maintain blogs or create personal Web sites or sites for school, friends or organizations. And 32 percent of adolescents use instant messaging (IM) services every single day.

Not that adolescents and young adults don’t still like to talk on the telephone—their reliance on cell phones both in and out of school is a subject for another article—but to a large extent online communication has replaced the telephone in their world. A recent market research study of undergraduates declared the social networking Web site Facebook to be as “in” on college campuses as beer.

“Facebook is a really easy site to use,” says Anjali Patel, a senior molecular biology major at Arizona State University. As a columnist for her college newspaper, Patel has written several articles on the role of Internet communication in young adults’ lives. “When you need someone for something, it’s easy to get their e-mail straight from Facebook. It’s like a directory.”

LESSON

2

Web sites put power in user’s hands

Common to all social networking sites is a user’s ability to post his picture and the type of

information you might exchange in an icebreaker—favorites movies, quotes, relationship status, etc. Sites also allow users to accept comments from profile visitors in a sort of virtual bulletin board. MySpace members may customize their profile layouts with images and music of their choosing. (It pays to have your computer volume turned low when you visit MySpace; otherwise, you’ll suddenly be blasted out by music.) MySpace also allows users to post photo slideshows and graphics within their profiles.

The security features of sites vary. MySpace is searchable by school, college or ZIP code. Any user may view public profiles. (MySpace announced in June that it was beefing up security measures for minors after a \$30 million lawsuit was filed in Travis County against the company for failing to protect minors from sexual predators. The mother and daughter filing the suit say the 14-year-old was sexually assaulted by someone she met on MySpace).

A Facebook user may only view the profiles of users within his “network” (school) or those of users who have agreed to be his “friend.” Bebo, the most popular social networking Web site in the United Kingdom, operates in a similar manner.

Some social networking sites (including MySpace) offer users the ability to keep a blog. Blog is short for Web log, or a site on which an individual user or group of users contributes regular posts. In most cases, readers are able to discuss the blog’s content through a feedback system. Beyond that, there is no hard and fast definition of a blog. Some offer political commentary or

news with a slant; others focus on a specific topic, such as interior design (*designsponge.blogspot.com*), beauty products (*blog.nadinehaobsh.com*) or even integrating technology into the classroom (*www.edutopia.org/community/spiralnotebook/*). Still others are “photoblogs” (regularly posted photographs) or “vlogs” (videos). Some companies even have blogs.

Most teenagers’ blogs fall into the personal diary category. These are the blogs that tend to make headlines. Familiar with the term “dooced”? That’s Internet-speak for losing your job because of something you wrote on your blog. The term came from the name of a blog whose creator met that fate.

Here are just a few of the headlines involving adolescents: “Teens’ Bold Blogs Alarm Area Schools,” from *The Washington Post*; “Schools in quandary over student bloggers,” from the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*; and “School prank posted on Web site,” from the *Belfast [Ireland] Telegraph*. One suburban Chicago school district recently revised its student code of conduct to read “Maintaining or being identified on a blog site which depicts illegal or inappropriate behavior will be considered a violation of this code.”

How schools will handle students’ online conduct, the majority of which occurs off-campus but greatly affects the school environment, is something to watch in the next year. (For information about how educators can responsibly use social networking sites, see page 24.) Social networking sites will come and go—some trend watchers have already declared MySpace “so last year”—but having an online identity is central to modern adolescence.



LESSON

3

Teen angst prevails, or: Why must I be a teenager online?

Not only are adolescents online in larger numbers than adults, but they also use the Internet differently. According to the Pew Internet and American Life Project, Internet users ages 12–28 are more likely to go online to IM, play games and maintain blogs, while users older than 28 use the Internet for “business” purposes such as online banking and travel reservations.

But the difference between adolescent and adult use of the Internet goes beyond business and pleasure. Teenagers “inhabit” the Internet; their use of social networking sites, blogs and IM constitutes a “co-construction” of the world of reality. In a January 2006 article for the journal *Developmental Psychology*, psychologists Patricia Greenfield and Zheng Yan wrote, “We must see the Internet as a new social environment in which universal adolescent issues such as identity, sexuality and a sense of self-worth are played out in a virtual world in ways that are both new and old.”

What’s new is the medium, not the behavior, according to Janay Sander, a psychologist and assistant professor in the department of educational psychology at the University of Texas at Austin. Sander teaches undergraduate education majors about adolescent physiology, brain development, hormones and social development.

“As adolescents, we have a need to belong to something and to see other people like you,” Sander says. “Adolescents want to be validated by a peer group, and the Internet opens up more possibilities for that. It’s similar to a club or organization that attracts members of like-mindedness.”

MySpace

The most infamous of all social networking sites, MySpace is just one of many. Notorious for bad graphics and slow-loading pages. Also used by the music industry to create grassroots buzz for new artists.

www.myspace.com

Bebo

The most popular social networking site in the United Kingdom. It’s gaining ground in the United States. Users may belong to one school group at a time and search profiles only within that school group.

www.bebo.com

Facebook

The social networking site of choice on college campuses. To join the college version, users must have a “.edu” e-mail address, but Facebook recently expanded to allow high school students to post profiles. Users may only view the profiles of those within their school network or those who have confirmed that they’re “friends.”

www.facebook.com

AIM (AOL Instant Messenger)

Not a Web site, but software. The king of instant messaging programs. Users go by screennames, and through the use of “buddy lists” know when their friends are online. Users may post away messages, such as “Studying for my bio midterm—blahhh.”

www.aim.com

LiveJournal

A cross between social networking and blogging. LiveJournal has more usable blogging capabilities than MySpace, and it allows users to join interest communities.

www.livejournal.com

Blogger

A straight blogging site that offers users HTML templates that are easy to update. Blogger URLs include the word “blogspot.”

www.blogger.com

Flickr

A popular photo-sharing site. Users may set unique privacy levels for each of their photos, and site visitors may leave comments on the photos they see. Allows easy posting of photos to any blog site.

www.flickr.com

YouTube

Quite possibly the greatest time-waster of all time, and outdone in the copyright infringement department only by Napster. Users may post self-produced videos or remixes of other content. If you’ve ever wanted to see William Shatner sing “Rocket Man,” a man tell his cat that she’s fat or *anything* else you can think of, this is the place to go.

www.youtube.com

» EWWYSAS?

(Ever wonder what your students are saying?)

If you've ever intercepted text-messaging students or wondered how to decipher your own children's instant message (IM) conversations, check out www.netlingo.com. The site offers up "The Top 20 Internet Acronyms Every Parent Needs to Know." Here are the acronyms suitable for printing in a professional/family publication. You'll have to head online for the rest:

POS—Parent over shoulder

PIR—Parent in room

P911—Parent alert

PAW—Parents are watching

PAL—Parents are listening

ASL—Age/sex/location

MorF—Male or female

SorG—Straight or gay

LMIRL—Let's meet in real life

KPC—Keeping parents clueless

ADR—Address

WYCM—Will you call me?

KFY—Kiss for you

MOOS—Member(s) of the opposite sex

MOSS or MOTSS—Members of the same sex

NALOPKT—Not a lot of people know that

But while no one questions a teenager's need to join the student council, social networking sites draw headlines like "Teen, mom sue MySpace for \$30 million." According to Sander, it's up to adults to ensure that adolescents inhabit this new world safely.

"It's a little more anonymous, which, in itself, is not bad," she says. "It's bad when someone isn't savvy or safe, or if the parents don't know how much is going on. Parents and teachers have an obligation to help them navigate safely."

Social networking sites foster a sense of artificial togetherness. For instance, LiveJournal users can choose "interests" as varied as "acting crazy" to "George Lopez" and then be connected with like-minded users; Facebook offers a similar concept with its "groups"—everything from "One Tree Hill addicts" to "John Cusack is my hero."

Sifting through MySpace and LiveJournal pages, it's quickly apparent how much adolescents rely on social networking sites to express their identities. According to the Pew Internet project, girls ages 15–17 are the most likely to keep blogs. One blogger from West Texas who identifies herself as part of that demographic writes:

"I get pretty upset whenever people are upset with MySpace, probably because MySpace is more than just a 'profile' to me. It's become who I am. It's become memories and beautiful people that I've met throughout high school. You know, the kind of people who you don't know that much, who you exchange a friendly/funny comment with."

Perhaps saying "MySpace is who I am" is delving into hyperbole,

but it further reinforces research suggesting that teenagers are taking their main developmental issues—identity and sexuality—online. Researchers from the Children's Digital Media Center at the University of California–Los Angeles monitored 20 chat sessions among participants identifying themselves as adolescents and found that more than half made declarations of identity (indicated age and gender). Of nicknames/screen names used, about 20 percent had sexual connotations, and almost half were gendered. Researchers posited that using a "sexy" nickname is akin to dressing provocatively or wearing lots of makeup in the real world. Going online as "Sweet Lovin" is one way to try on a sexual identity.

Sometimes these highly sexualized nicknames belong to teenagers whose profiles also feature the results of online quizzes like "Which Disney princess are you?" This juxtaposition can be jarring, but Sander says it's all part of the task of being a teenager.

"They're projecting different images to see what feedback they'll get," she explains. "The image receiving the most feedback perceived as positive by the adolescent will stick around longer. This seeming inconsistency is part of trying out different styles."

Overall, researchers find that older teenage girls are the most powerful Internet communicators and information seekers. Not only are they more likely to maintain blogs, but they're also more likely to use e-mail, IM, search for information about colleges and visit entertainment-related Web sites. They're also heavily reliant on the Internet for health and sexuality information.



LESSON

4

Try “content creation” with your students

All of this is powerful information for educators, particularly when combined with the knowledge that more than half of online teens are “content creators.” Adolescents don’t just passively consume content; they actively produce it.

“The need for adolescents to have a say in something translates to the classroom really well,” Sander says. “They like having choice in an assignment. Help them find a topic they can take and make their own.”

As a professor of instructional technologies at San Francisco State University, Peggy Benton studies ways to incorporate content creation into classrooms. She says that given the highly developed ways in which today’s students express themselves verbally and visually online, teachers should look for ways to channel students’ online energy into the classroom.

» See examples of presentations on bullying produced by British 10- and 11-year-olds using content creation software Kar2ouche at www.lgfl.net/lgfl/leas/brent/schools/marymag/web/bullying/home/.

“Teachers could piggyback on social networking in a safer space,” she says. “For example, at think.com, you can start a password-protected community based on your school. The teachers have pages, and you can have a parents’ page. You can publish to the global community—to children in China, South America, England, all over—but it puts social networking in a safer space.”

Benton also recommends digital storytelling—projects that appeal to students who spend hours organizing their photos for photo-sharing Web site Flickr or carrying around digital camcorders for their latest endeavors on YouTube.com, a video-sharing Web site.

“There are easy products available for students to use to create their own slide shows and add music to their narratives,” she says. Such software includes iPhoto, Kid Pix, Comic Life and Kar2ouche.

Benton acknowledges that teachers might have to work hard to catch up to students who practically came out of the womb clicking on the mouse.

“It’s a steep climb,” she says. “They use the Internet adeptly, far more adeptly than parents, teachers and administrators. Unless there’s someone to help you, it’s a lot of hit and miss. You might pick up a product you think will work, and then it doesn’t.”

She recommends that teachers looking to capitalize on their students’

interest in content creation work with their schools’ technology coordinators, get involved with computer education associations and take technology courses at community colleges or local universities, if such courses are available.

LESSON

5

Content creation empowers students

One more piece of evidence that adolescents thrive as content

creators: The proliferation of social networking and blogging sites means that the ability to self-publish has never been as readily available as it is today. One recent high school graduate from West Texas wrote about the blogging phenomenon on his LiveJournal:

“We, the outwardly focused, upwardly mobile, always on the go generation regularly stop for a second, look within ourselves and write about our thoughts, our hopes, fears, dreams, feelings—our lives. The effect is profound. For some, friendships are forged. For others, the drama is too much. Worlds collide with just one sentence, and it seems like trouble can be found at every corner. Regardless, the personal blog is a powerful tool and shows the world—and ourselves—how much weight the written word can have.”

Nicely put. ☺