

RESEARCHING RESOURCES

Application 5: Researching Resources

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I would like to start a learning community about online social networks. Social networking, which can exist in online or offline circles, refers to a social structure of interconnected "nodes" (usually individuals or organizations) that can interact on various levels. Social networking is particularly starting to thrive on the Internet, where efficient communication and rich interaction are becoming increasingly easier and more common.

Social networking is something that I am passionate about, something that peaks my interest as I follow its development and its affect upon young men and women. It's also something that is extremely relevant to my students. Most of them are already intricately involved in at least one online social network, connecting with friends that they know in real life and also making new friends who they have never met before.

My first goal would be to help my students to understand the nature and structure of online social networks. Second, I would want them to make connections between social networks and earlier units on personal information, security, and confidentiality. Third, I would want them to experience an educational social network with a meaningful and controlled environment. Finally, I would want to create a personal "manifesto" that outlines their approach, involvement, commitment, priorities, and intentions regarding their involvement in online social networks.

I believe that this learning community would help my students take ownership of their experience in online communities, developing leadership and the perspective of

others ... both characteristics that Alan November claims are integral parts of learning communities (2004). They would benefit from investigating this important part of their digital lives together, gaining understanding, and subsequent accountability, as a group.

During my information search, I decided to look for examples of social networking sites that affect my students. I also decided to look for resources about social networking, current analysis of this fast-growing portion of the Internet. Finally, I attempted to find a unique way to host a social network of our own internally at our middle school, giving my students a safe place to learn about social networks experientially.

From my research, I found that there are several social networking sites that are drawing the most attention and participation from users the same age as my students. MySpace, Facebook, YouTube, Digg, and Xanga are the most popular. LiveJournal, Flitter, Bebo, Friendster, GoPets, Last.fm, Flickr, Threadless, and Yahoo 360 are close behind, drawing a modest or declining amount of young users. To be honest, the sheer number of social networking sites out there is huge ... and new ones are being created at a dizzying pace.

There were not a lot of resources about social networking ... it seems that online social networking is such a new trend that complex resources and in-depth research simply hasn't been conducted on it yet. I did, however, find a great summary on Wikipedia and a couple of blogs (The Social Networking Weblog and Mashable) that

chronicle current news about social networking. Thus, although a comprehensive overarching set of resources are not yet available for social networking, there are some very current and developing resources for my students to use.

I was also not able to find a unique way to host a social network on our own internal school network. While some services offer some of the features of social networking, none of them were nearly as comprehensive as the online social networks that are discussed above.

My students would undoubtedly use some of the same resources that I did while looking for information about social networking. They would also probably be able to draw largely from their own experience, sharing advantages and disadvantages of each service and even providing personal stories about social networking on the Internet. Processing and sharing this information together would help them to obtain higher levels of learning.

If we were able to create a closed social network at our school, I believe that this learning would be advanced even more. Students would be able to experience the advantages and disadvantages of online social networking together, discussing shared experiences and offering suggestions for the use and improvement of these services and communities. The relationships that would be formed in the midst of an experience like that would be invaluable, helping the students to enhance their experiences and increase their learning exponentially.

Overall, I felt that my research was fairly easy. The information that exists about online social networking is all fairly new, so discerning which information is accurate or authoritative is much easier than it would be with other topics. Utilizing some basic search skills, I was able to find information that was not only useful to me but also useful for my students. One of these findings, Mashable, was particularly pleasing to me. The stories and information it contained were eloquent, current, relevant, and interesting. I'm sure that I would recommend it to my students!

In conclusion, I feel that this learning community would work well with my curriculum, addressing key parts of my students' learning and the content standards that I must cover within the time of my courses. It would heighten their interest as well, tapping into a subject that many of them already have personal experience with. Finally, it would create relationships among my students that would help them to process and practice their learning, helping to prepare them to be responsible members of online social networks.

Resource:

Canter, L., & Winberry, K. (Directors). (2004). Program 5: Teacher as leader: Building learning communities [motion picture]. In C. Arnold (Producer), *Technology, Leadership, and a Vision for the Future*. Los Angeles: Laureate Education, Inc.