

Promote Digital Citizenship through School-Based Social Networking



Just as participation in social networking has grown, so has media coverage of inappropriate activity online. Teacher–student relationships and cyberbullying are just a few of the stories that seem to make the news on a regular basis. For educators, this is particularly troubling, considering how few students know what is appropriate when using social networking tools.

With the legal, moral, and ethical risks associated with online communication, it is understandable why many school districts hesitate to use social networking as a way to prepare students to be safe and responsible digital citizens. There are, however, new social networks that allow for tighter control. These networks allow students to communicate with their peers, teachers, and administrators on a platform that is open and accountable. Our PK–12 school, Southwest Christian in Fort Worth, Texas, USA, uses a school-based social network that lets teachers integrate social networking into their curricula while teaching students appropriate online etiquette.

School-Based Social Networking

Online social networks that are based at school are comparable to Facebook and MySpace. Students can create profile pages and update them with personal information. They can share their opinions, thoughts, and experiences with others. They can post comments, pictures, video, and other content, and they can join groups and participate in forums. Major differences between school-based networks and popular public sites include issues of access and accountability.

Unlike other social networking sites, our network is limited to the students, teachers, and administrators of our school. Students are protected

from outside predators, spammers, and other harmful influences. We can even create subnetworks to separate students by grade level. For example, we created subnetworks to prevent elementary, middle, and high school students from interacting with students outside their age range.

When adults and minors communicate, their relationships must be accountable. Private and instant messaging, functions of many popular social networks, are not always used appropriately. Even if private conversations are appropriate, the idea that they might not be is enough to cause suspicion. Our network has no privacy. Every comment, post, and message is public for every member. There are no “friendships,” and the system instantly networks every participant. The effect of this is two-fold. First, all communication tends to be acceptable, so there is little suspicion of inappropriate online relationships. This promotes student safety and job security for teachers and administrators. Second, the system encourages digital etiquette because every member can potentially read every post, including those from teachers and administrators. This promotion of integrity is a key benefit to our school-based network.

Creation

We implemented social networking in four stages: creation, introduction, integration, and, finally, expansion and new curriculum.

Some of the options for a school-based social network include Social Engine, Edmodo, and Ning. Our school wanted a customizable option that we could maintain, which led us to SocialEngine. This company provides open source social network platforms that a school can customize. We wanted to own our site and have the freedom and flexibility to manage

it. To accomplish this, we assigned a teacher to manage the task and created a tech apps class that is dedicated to maintaining the site.

Student Introduction

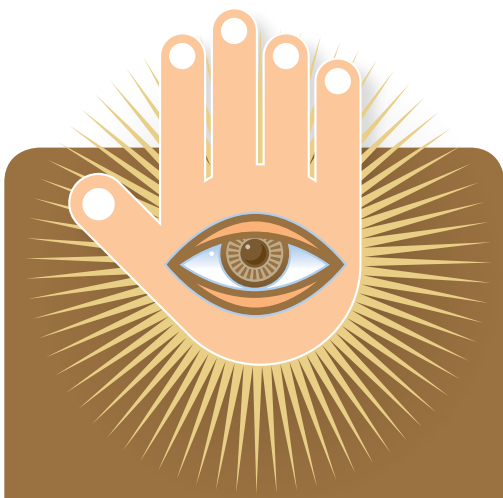
We decided to enlist our middle school students to pilot the program for two reasons: First, not all middle school students had public social networking accounts, and second, the middle school is about half the size of the high school.

At the beginning of the school year, we trained students and teachers to navigate the site and customize their pages. Within days, students had discovered how to change their profiles’ cascading style sheets, and they were engaging in our new virtual community. This exciting adoption gave us hope that our network could be useful for developing digital citizens and integrating technology into our curriculum.

Curriculum Integration

Our social network has become an option for integrating technology into our existing curriculum by serving as an online extension of the classroom. Our teachers can use the site to communicate, conduct, and assess assignments. For example, Ryan Abt, a history teacher at our school, used a custom subnetwork to allow students to create profiles for historical figures. The students assumed the identity of each figure; created posts and blogs; and shared photos, videos, and more. Here is what Abt said about the experience:

I enjoyed watching my students get excited about the social network biography project because it brought history alive to them. It truly gave attitude to historical characters who had previously been one dimensional.



Digital Citizenship

In their book *Digital Citizenship in Schools*, Mike Ribble and Gerald Bailey (ISTE, 2007) define digital citizenship as “the norms of appropriate, responsible behavior with regard to technology use.” They have also established nine elements to delineate the broad concept of digital citizenship. While our social network does not yet fully address all nine, it does address many of them. Listed below are six of the elements and how our network addresses them.

Digital communication. Our network promotes appropriate communication between students, faculty, and administrators.

Digital literacy. Students can learn to navigate online communities and use them to enhance their academic experiences.

Digital etiquette. This may be the most strongly supported element. Our network is a highly accountable system that we monitor to ensure that the student’s behavior is appropriate. If online misconduct, such as cyberbullying, occurs, the school is able to take a quick and redemptive approach to discipline, promoting responsible online activity.

Digital rights and responsibilities. By extending the privilege to students to access and participate in the network, our school can directly teach students about rights and responsibilities they have as digital citizens.

Digital health and wellness. With time stamps, teachers and administrators can monitor when students post as well as the frequency and scope. If students are on the network late at night or for many consecutive hours, the school, along with the parents, can address appropriate use to promote the students’ health and well-being.

Digital security. Due to the highly monitored and accountable nature of our social network, teachers and administrators have an ongoing responsibility to ensure that students are not posting material that will leave them vulnerable to online attacks or theft.

This high-level learning activity illustrates just one of the many ways we have integrated assignments with our social network. Other activities include blogging about various topics, discussing issues in our forum area, and using the polling feature to gauge student understanding. Students use the photo album section to post images related to their assignments. This year, our photography teacher plans to use social networking to discuss elements of students’ photos.

We have also used our social network to facilitate quality home study. For example, class discussions, while wonderful if done well, will always have some major limitations. Not every student can make thoughtful comments without having some time to process the information. In addition, a discussion that allows every student to contribute and reply to other students’ contributions would take an enormous amount of time. A forum, blog, and comment wall allow students to gather their thoughts before posting comments, to consider other students’ comments, and to respond to as many of them as they want. This process saves valuable class time and leaves the students with a rich experience. The system saves all comments so teachers can accurately and easily assess students’ knowledge and participation.

Expansion and New Curriculum

We have created subnetworks for our sixth grade students at our elementary campus as well as for middle and high school students at our preparatory

campus. We will grant sixth graders access to their subnetwork in the spring of next year in an attempt to let them gain familiarity with the site before using it in an academic setting the following year. This will also provide a safer alternative to Facebook—something especially important to parents who are not ready to allow their 11- and 12-year-old kids to have a public social networking account. Although most of our use of the network has been limited to middle school students, our high school will begin using its subnetwork next school year.

Digital citizenship does not just happen. Teaching it has to be intentional, with lessons that show students the acceptable norms of online behavior. While this can be broken into small chunks and presented in all subject areas, we decided to add a middle school technology class with an emphasis on promoting digital citizenship. Students explore scenarios and learn about legal, moral, and ethical issues associated with technology use. This class is also the place to teach students the ins and outs of our social network and related software.

The Teacher’s Role

The role of our teachers is to model appropriate behavior by interacting with students and other faculty online. Teachers are also encouraged to build relationships with their students by communicating with them via the network. One teacher said that students respond to those who care about them. By respecting students and being involved in their lives, our teach-

Features	SocialEngine	Edmodo	Ning Plus or Pro
Customization	Full	Some	Full
Messaging Control	Can turn off	No restriction	Can turn off
Media Uploading	Yes	Yes	Yes
Blogs/Forums	Yes	Yes	Yes
Cost	\$250–\$620	Free	\$199–\$499/year

ers have gained significant ground in the classroom. The network gives teachers an opportunity to connect with their students in an appropriate manner. One teacher commented:

It allowed me to communicate with them in their world of social networking while also being protected by the oversight of school administration. I think it is a very strong tool for safe communication with your students outside the classroom.

Our teachers also assume part of the responsibility for developing digital citizens. Although we don't primarily task our teachers with monitoring students' online etiquette, their social networking activities provide an opportunity to address potential issues as they arise. Just as a teacher would take the time to discuss appropriate behavior in a classroom or cafeteria, they also make the effort to discuss online behavior. One example was a young lady who posted that she and her friends "partied all night long," referring to an innocent and perfectly appropriate sleepover with her friends. We were able to help her see the connotations associated with that phrase and explained that it could negatively misrepresent her and our school. Her principal commented:

When I read the post to her and asked how it might be interpreted by someone who does not know her, she immediately got it. This was a perfect example of a student working through a real issue in a safe environment, and the best part

was she resolved it herself without having to be told what to do.

Lastly, the primary role of the teacher is to use the network often. If our teachers and students are accessing the site on a regular basis, then our school has the opportunity to shape students into responsible digital citizens.

Build Your Own Network

Promoting digital citizenship via a private social network has provided an extraordinary opportunity for our school, parents, and students. It has given us the opportunity to arm students with knowledge and teach them how to safely navigate online communities without many of the problems that accompany public social networking sites. Our network allows us to meet and exceed ISTE's NETS for Students on digital citizenship in a practical, safe, and integrated fashion.

Although school-based social networks alone will not develop digital citizens, they can offer an opportunity to begin discussions on the topic and provide meaningful guidance that will enhance students' digital futures.

Resources

Edmodo: www.edmodo.com
 ISTE NETS•S: iste.org/nets/students
 Ning: www.ning.com
 SocialEngine: www.socialengine.net



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