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Introduction

Social software has rapidly begun to transform popular perceptions of the internet. Although the early adopters are not always young, online social networking is now firmly embedded in youth culture. Yet less than ten years ago the idea that children and young people might use digital communication to sustain and extend their friendships was startlingly new. In an early study of teenagers' uses of chatrooms it almost seemed to me that I was documenting an exotic behaviour that was hidden from public view (Merchant, 2001). Now not only the names of the most popular social networking sites - MySpace, Facebook and Bebo – but also the practices associated with them, are very much a part of public discourse in the major world economies as well as in developing ones. In this chapter I look at how the literacies associated with social software present a new set of challenges for educators, illustrating this with data from my own research with teachers and the students they work with.

The changes in popular engagement with digitally mediated communication that this involves have been widespread and transnational whilst at the same time being unevenly distributed and locally interpreted. Differences between the ways in which social networking sites are used and populated reflect differences between societies as well as within them. For all the talk about the role of new technology in widening social participation (Davies & Merchant, 2009) digital divides persist, although perhaps not in the rather narrow ways originally suggested by Tapscott (1996). Whilst the use of social networking sites (SNSs) spans many traditional social groupings such as race, gender, social class, occupation and age group, there is plenty of evidence of the barriers to participation as well as carefully articulated resistance or refusal. Despite a number of widespread survey studies, the patterns and effects of digital exclusion have yet to be charted or theorised (Selwyn & Facer, 2007). At the same time the reach of SNSs has become such that 'doing friendship' online has rapidly become normalised.

Between moral panic about the negative effect of these new practices on our cultural life, on our social interactions, and even on our cognitive functioning, and the idealisation of a utopian networked society in which everything is 'better' because it is digitally-enhanced, lie the everyday practices of a large segment of society. In general terms these digital practices have become so common place and so familiar that they frequently escape our serious attention. In addition to this, everyday literacy practices in SNSs are often depicted as being trivial or banal, and as such unlike the real world of corporate uses of ICT (Carrington, 2008). Nonetheless, SNSs are providing an arena for the development of new skills and understandings as well as new kinds of sociability, and they have succeeded in doing this in areas in which many training programmes have failed. Furthermore, many of the digital practices associated with Web 2.0, including social networking, are now being incorporated into mainstream institutional uses of new technology – and this is particularly the case in education, as learning platforms or virtual learning environments begin to include such features as blogs, wikis and RSS feeds (Davies & Merchant, 2009). What is being learnt informally through social networking may well become as important in educational activity as it is in the world of work.

Experts and literacy educators have seized upon the Web 2.0 phenomenon as a way of challenging the status quo and proposing a fundamental re-appraisal of education (Gee, 2004; Lankshear & Knobel, 2006). Regardless of where we stand on this debate, surveys on both sides of the Atlantic testify to the widespread appeal of online social networking (Livingstone, Bober & Hesper, 2005; Lenhart, Madden, Macgill & Smith, 2007). In these new social environments children and young people are involved in a process of making and re-making identities, taking complex decisions on how and what to present to their friends and the wider community.

In this chapter, I draw on data from ongoing research into the use of SNSs, focusing directly on adolescents' perceptions of the literacy and identity work they do on the profile pages of popular social networking sites. Setting this alongside teacher interviews I explore the possibilities as well as some of the tensions and contradictions that lie at the heart of working with these new literacies in classrooms. This work is framed by my own belief that it is important that educators understand and engage with the digital literacies in general (Merchant, 2007a) and SNSs in particular, and I argue this for a number of reasons. Firstly, because SNSs invoke new literacy practices that are significant in the everyday lives of children and young people; secondly, because they provide important contexts in which identities are constructed and produced through digital practices; and thirdly, because they offer opportunities to explore complex issues around commercialisation, the ownership of content and copyright. In the first part of this chapter I begin with a brief definition of SNSs before expanding on these three propositions.

Mapping the territory – social networking sites

Social networking could be regarded as a way of describing the patterning of everyday practices of social interaction – particularly those that take place outside of the normally intimate relationship structures of family life. Traditionally, this social networking has been driven by face-to-face interaction (see Wellman, 2002). In this way we could talk about the social networks of friendship groups, co-workers, or those that form within the social institutions of a whole variety of groups, organisations and clubs that serve our varied needs and affiliations. Social institutions and the informal or casual encounters that occur in and between them provide contexts for the maintenance and development of friendship and acquaintance. Just as Goffman (1983) describes the rise of the two-couple dinner party as a middle class social network ritual, so we might extend this notion of network rituals to include hanging out on street corners and shopping malls, or the various encounters that are the social lifeblood of the night-time economy. Social network rituals are an essential yet constantly changing feature of youth culture.

If this rather sketchy picture captures an understanding of what we might call 'traditional' face-to-face social networking, then it could be suggested that advances in the technologies of communication have tended to act as accompaniments and sometimes supplements to these patterns of interaction. So, for example, postal systems and telephone networks have, for most of their history, allowed us to sustain and thicken existing social network ties. From this point of view online social networking could be seen as an extension of this phenomenon. However, such an argument is not to be read as an attempt to gloss over

some important distinguishing features of SNSs or their significance as new digital literacy practices; in fact that is one of the main concerns of this chapter.

The term *online social networking* is probably best used as a way of capturing, in a rather general way, the use of web-based communication to build or maintain such things as friendship or interest groups, extended family ties, and professional, political or religious affiliations. As popular perceptions of the internet shift from seeing it as a platform for delivering content and information to viewing it as a space for interaction and entertainment (Merchant, 2006) so the use of a wide range of new literacies has come to the fore. This has led to the rise of what Brandt has called self-sponsored writing: a writing that belongs to the writer rather than an institution (Brandt, 2001). In other words, children and young people are increasingly involved in a new literacy practice that is self-initiated and largely independent of formal education.

Literacy educators, it has been argued, urgently need to assess the significance of new communication technologies and the ways of producing, distributing and responding to others in this new textual universe (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003). The web environments, software tools, and media that help to produce this textual universe are extremely varied and include well-established practices such as email groups, listservs and bulletin boards, as well as more recent developments such as MMOGs and 3D virtual worlds. These and related practices could be seen as constituting online social networking as a popular and broad-based activity.

An important subset of online social networking is made up of those environments that are specifically designed to support and develop friendship, and whose overt purpose is to provide a context and appropriate tools for doing this. I use the term *social networking sites* (SNSs for short) to describe these environments – Bebo, MySpace, Facebook and Twitter being the most popular examples at the moment (see Figure 1 for more). Whilst I part company with boyd and Ellison (2008:211) on the distinction between ‘networking’, which they argue implies active ‘relationship initiation’, and ‘network’, which for them suggests relationship maintenance, I find their definition of SNSs extremely helpful. boyd and Ellison (2008) anchor their definition to three core characteristics. These are that:

- Individual users or members construct a public or semi-public profile on the site
- Users/members create and list connections with others (friends, followers or buddies)
- Users/members traverse the site through their own and others’ friendlists

Although it could be argued that these characteristics are shared with other environments which may not focus on friendship quite so explicitly (Blogger and similar applications come to mind), the emphasis on presence, connection and community are certainly germane to an understanding of these social networking sites.

To conclude this preliminary attempt to map the territory, it is important to acknowledge a certain blurring of boundaries between wider online social networking and the smaller area of specific SNSs as defined above (see Figure 1 for an illustration of this). This blurring is most evident in web-based services that have supported the growth of a community, or

communities of interest – or what Gee (2004) refers to as an affinity space. Here I am thinking of such phenomena as the Flickr photo-sharing community, music exchange in Last.fm, and those other online spaces which benefit substantially from having their own ‘in house’ social networking tools. Because these sites depend on social networking around a specific activity, usefully described by Engestrom (2007) as a ‘social object’, they provide a template for educational activity. As I argue elsewhere (Merchant, 2007b) it takes relatively little imagination to picture how the social object might be reconstituted as a learning object. In fact some applications in VLEs already hold this promise, suggesting that learners’ experiences of social networking could easily transfer into educational environments, as social networks shade into learning networks.

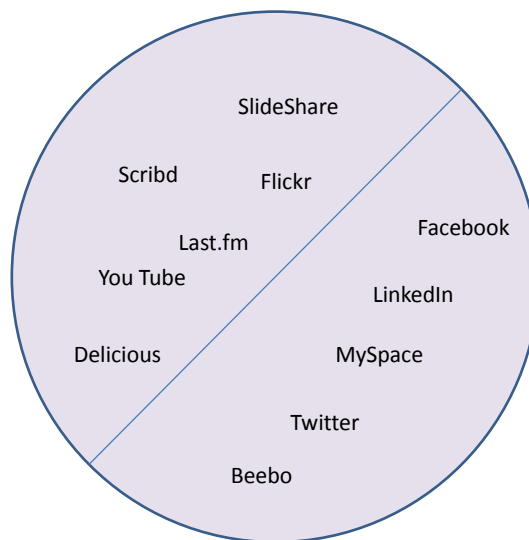


Figure 1: A map of social software showing some popular sites that promote social networking (left) and SNSs (right)

The attraction of social networking and its relevance to recent developments in education is highlighted by the FutureLab document ‘Social Software and Learning.’ Here the authors suggest that:

‘...social software is enabling people to do things with internet technology that they clearly want to do themselves – and as they discover more things they want to do the software develops. Social software is therefore satisfying a need that maps closely onto educational needs and current agendas. Social software is about personal services on the web, and consequently it is about personalisation. It is inherently social and the gains of using social software are gains that come from collaboration.’

(Owen, Grant, Sayers & Facer, 2006:28)

In what follows I focus on SNSs as an arena for new literacy practices, as online spaces for producing identity and friendship, and as a particular kind of textual performance.

Social networking sites as an arena for new literacies

The communicative practices that are sometimes rather loosely referred to as Web 2.0 or social networking constitute rapidly developing forms of digital literacy (Davies & Merchant, 2009; Lankshear & Knobel, 2006) and these are central to our current concerns. Leaving aside for now the controversies about terminology and definition (see Merchant, 2007a for an exploration of these), the fact that SNSs involve youth in new ways of producing, distributing and responding to text seems to be at once highly significant and unavoidable. The interviews weⁱ conducted with teenagers show that, whilst these young people might not consider themselves as experts, they freely refer to new practices such as 'changing skins', 'writing on walls', 'messaging', 'apps' and 'tagging photographs', in describing their everyday literacy activity. To say, as one of our interviewees did, '*you can just write on their wall really quickly - it's a convenient thing*', is to acknowledge a particular kind of expertise and interactivity as well as to hint at its normalisation in the daily lives of young people. So in these and other ways, SNSs depend upon a form of interactive written discourse that is enriched by the multimodal affordances of the social networking software, as members share and comment on observations, music and images. Through their immersion in these communicative environments, many young people are now aware of the potential to extend and enrich their social interactions, to maintain a connection with different groups such as '*people from choir*' and '*relatives that live in America*' and so on.

Teenagers are also sensitive to the ways in which spaces like Facebook can be used to navigate the complex worlds of friendship and intimacy. Below, one interviewee describes how online and offline worlds interweave as SNSs are used to soften inhibitions and to provide a starting point for more difficult interactions:

'I think you can make closer friends with people because by talking to them - maybe on Facebook, maybe on the chat thing - you might then have more confidence to talk to them in school or out- I think that can help where you do sort of get close to people - and then it is easier to talk to people..'

But of course, the role of SNSs in overcoming reticence or shyness in face-to-face communication sits alongside the work that these teenagers do in friendship maintenance - those online activities that are frequently referred to as 'catching up'. Although some commentators have been rather dismissive about the banal or frivolous activity that this involves, I would argue that the playfully social (to borrow a phrase from Graham, 2008) plays a very important part in these new textual worlds, and has, in fact, always been significant in human relationships. This is well-illustrated when one of our interviewees describes how she might maintain a 'connection' with her friend.

'...with your really close friends - like with us - we just leave sort of stupid comments - like if we haven't seen each other in a couple of days because now we are at a different school - it's just we will be like 'love you'...'

Beyond these concerns with maintaining and developing friendships, there is often a suspicion amongst teenagers of the more random or unsolicited SNS encounters. Consistent with Boyd and Ellison (2008) their emphasis appears to be on making existing social networks visible, rather than meeting new people. Nonetheless the teenagers that we have been working with are acutely aware of the wider web audience and even some of the media stories that have drawn attention to the blurring of personal and professional boundaries. Caution may be exercised in deciding what to make public because *'you hear those things about how like universities and employers look at it...'*

In sum, to use a well-worn and perhaps rather traditional categorisation, these observations suggest that children and young people that use SNSs are attuned to the dimensions of audience, form and purpose in their online production and consumption of texts. Teachers concerned with literacy, communication studies, English or media studies, take note! But somehow, educational responses to the changing nature of literacy in curriculum design and content as well as pedagogy have to date been rather patchy (Dowdall, 2009). On the whole it would be fair to say that the most interesting work has been done by enthusiasts (see Davies & Merchant, 2009 for examples) rather than through funded initiatives, or by state and government mandate. Partly as result of this there is a disconnect between the experiences of young people and some teachers' understandings of how digital literacy practices might be used in the classroom. So for example, one teacher we interviewed saw the new literacies in terms of a generational divide as she reflected on her experience as a parent:

'you suddenly realise what your son's writing....it's a separate language that is on there'

And then she goes on to describe this as:

' a breakdown of children's ability to be able to write correctly'

These are particularly candid comments and we have little empirical evidence to date on how widespread such attitudes are amongst teachers. But from the data we have collected, it seems that teachers do have quite varied responses to the new literacy practices of their students. Indeed some are very keen to include students' experiences where they can, and even go so far as attributing resistance to those they perceive to be the 'more traditional teachers'. However, as Burnett's (2009) work with pre-service teachers illustrates, there is a complex relationship between teachers' experience and confidence in using digital literacies, and the practices that they promote in the classroom. It is not a simple matter of age, experience or confidence.

In some instances it appears that curriculum guidance can give permission and encouragement to incorporate work on SNSs in school settings. As one teacher commented:

'In my GCSE Media course, they must use new technologies - so things like podcasting is their coursework ... like wikis and blog pages.'

She described how looking at SNSs had had a positive influence because it allowed students to engage with media texts they were familiar with. Reflecting and writing on that work enabled students to understand the diversity of textual forms that they used in their daily

life. In other cases, teachers were encouraging students to use their social networks to informally support school study and revision work and even sometimes, creatively recruiting young people's literacies to serve more conventional purposes, as the following describes:

'I say write up your notes and I used to say do it in shorthand but now I say do it in [that] language and it won't take you long, and they write it down in this form that I can't understand. I shorten words but not to the extent that they do!'

But a more sophisticated response to teenage engagement with SNSs would need to reach beyond notetaking and one-off study. If learning is a specialised form of social interaction or engagement then the literacy practices of online social networking may well provide a template for new kinds of pedagogy.

Youth and online identity performance

Online social networking has rapidly become a mainstream youth activity. In the UK, a recent survey by the Office of Communications (OfCom, 2008) found that almost half (49%) of 8-17 year olds had a profile on a SNS. Similar evidence is available elsewhere (Lenhart et al., 2007), and this suggests that although the favours of particular sites and providers may change, this sort of activity is likely to remain or grow. So although whole sectors of a population may migrate from MySpace to Bebo, from Bebo to Facebook and so on, as and when a particular site attracts attention, the role of SNSs in social life persists. This has led commentators like Beer (2008) to suggest that an analytical emphasis on new kinds of sociability and friendship may be more useful than the online/offline distinction that is often made. From this point of view, creating and maintaining an online presence can be seen as important identity work.

On SNSs members create profile pages, post pictures of themselves, display their friendships and allegiances, and indicate their tastes and preferences for different cultural products. They position themselves in these and other ways in the eyes of their friends – their actual and imagined readers. It is perhaps not surprising then, to find that academic study in this area often makes reference to the theatrical metaphor elaborated in the early work of Goffman (1959), as users quite literally perform identity in successive modifications of the multimodal pages of their online texts. These performances constitute a fluid and negotiated identity which, as Dowdall (2009) notes, is tethered to others in complex ways.

In the everyday social networks of young people it seems to be increasingly compelling to have some sort of presence on an SNS. Although Willet's (2009) work does identify a category of 'refuseniks' (young people who have made principled decision not to engage), students in this category are clearly a minority. In my own work there is evidence of what might be described as gentle peer pressure, captured by the comment: *'loads of people were on it and they were sort of – just- you should use it!'* Empirical work has yet to grapple with issues of levels of engagement. So although we have an emerging picture of the popularity of SNSs it is harder to separate out occasional, persistent or even reluctant engagement.

Amongst young people who are regularly involved, there are some interesting indications of how conceptions of taste are enacted on profile pages (see for example, Liu, 2008). Liu

describes online social networking in terms of a 'textual performance of the self', arguing that:

'The virtual materials of this performance are cultural signs – a user's self-described favourite books, music, movies, television, interests, and so forth – composed together into a *taste statement* that is 'performed' through the profile. By utilizing the medium of social network sites for taste performance, users can display their status and distinction to an audience comprised of friends, potential love interests, and the Web public.'

(Liu, 2008:253)

In my own interview data, there is clear evidence that cultural products are significant in teen networks. Not only do they talk about picking up information from profile pages as an interesting activity, they are also keen to learn about the favourite books and films of others. The idea of a 'community of readers' is clearly within reach, as the following statement suggests:

'you can [...] start discussions about it as well, so if you see someone's favourite book is like *Catcher in the Rye* and you can go oh I like that.'

This raises an important question for educators. Should this kind of activity be regarded as part of the non-formal social learning that we hope takes place outside of classroom environments or would we be better advised to take this into account when designing more formal learning experiences? This question is addressed in some detail in the final section of this chapter.

The relationship between literacy and identity has emerged as a key theme in recent scholarly writing. Literacy researchers and educators – particularly those adopting a socio-cultural perspective – are increasingly interested in the ways in which literacy is a key site for identity work. Literacy practices, they have argued, provide an arena for constructing and performing identities, and youth identity production in SNSs is a pertinent example of this. Exploring the ethics and aesthetics of textual performance on profile pages presents another important challenge for educators, since it provides an opportunity to explore taste and preference in consumption, as well as issues of self-presentation and what is appropriate in online behaviour. In my own work, teenagers talk about attention-seeking behaviour and friends '*wanting to look their best*'; but nevertheless within this social group there is a tacit understanding of what is acceptable. So images that show friends, humorous situations and social occasions are normal, but 'posing', or anything overtly sexual, attracts criticism from the peer group. Here the boundaries can be subtle or ill-defined. For example, one of our interviewees was clear about what she disliked:

'Well, like pouting! But I never do because you look ridiculous, mine [photographs] are normally amusing ones, or ones that I will look at and be like oh I really enjoyed that time...'

It is quite likely that there are not only broad gender differences here, but also differences within and between social networks. Nonetheless, the views of these girls concur with Willet's (2009) study of 14-16 year-olds in which sexually suggestive poses were seen as

unacceptable. Again these are issues for educators to grapple with here, some of which fall under the category of safety online, which is explored in the next section.

Unpackaging the text

Taking a greater interest in SNSs as a textual form is one way in which we might begin to understand what fires young people's enthusiasm and the ways in which they might prefer to learn. At the same time it is important to appreciate that teenagers who use social network sites constructively will be engaged in valuable learning processes through uploading, sharing and commenting on their own and others' content and ideas. These may be starting points in helping us to evaluate the role of SNSs in educational contexts, opening up the potential to learn *through* this kind of activity. At the same time though, SNS pages provide an opportunity for the sort of critical and analytical reading that are central to media studies and critical literacy (Buckingham, 2003). Some key themes here are the commercial interests of providers and advertisers, the ownership of content, and the issues of self-presentation and representation that were touched upon in the previous section.

A common blindspot in the work of those who extol the benefits of Web 2.0 and user-generated content is the simple, but perhaps transparent fact that sites are owned, designed and structured for different kinds of content production, distribution and interaction. A critical media studies approach to SNSs highlights these issues, encouraging young people to be more discerning consumers and producers of digital culture. An awareness of activities such as covert advertising and the corporate harvesting of market data need not necessarily work against the interest and engagement that is evident in youth participation in SNSs. However, the emphasis in this sort of approach is on learning *about* new media rather than learning *through* new media. Working in the media studies tradition, Buckingham (2003) offers a conceptual framework that can help us in planning this sort of approach in the classroom. The framework separates out four themes: production, representation, language and audience, and these provide a basis for the outline in Figure 2. These concepts can be applied to the classroom study of 'SNSs-as-texts', allowing us to structure learning activities that critically examine social networking as a media phenomenon.

Production

Technologies that are used to generate and distribute material
Commercial interests (advertising, market intelligence, and sponsorship)
Persuasion and influence – the activity of individuals and interest groups
Media links (relationships between providers and other platforms)

Representation

Authenticity and authority in claims to truth
Viewpoints that are adopted or omitted
Judgements about accuracy, truth, opinion and misinformation

Language

Design – visual and verbal rhetorics

Site structure, affordances and constraints
Levels of formality and assumptions about users/members
Kinds of interactivity, feedback and control or moderation

Audience

User exposure to visible and invisible commercial interest
Opportunities for data harvesting
The varied purposes that sites are used for
Differences in enjoyment and interpretation of sites – the individual response

Figure 2: Conceptual Framework for Critical Study of SNSs (adapted from Buckingham, 2003)

An area that this framework does not succeed in fully capturing is related to some of the issues of identity and self-presentation that were raised in the previous section. With the rise of popularity in SNSs, there have been a number of high profile cases which have called into question the safety of youth engagement with new media and what counts as appropriate behaviour in online environments. Whether this takes the form of supposed online suicide pacts, or exposure to sexual predators, the darker side of life online is part of the discourse that surrounds social networking. I argue that although there are some significant issues about security, privacy and online safety, these are better pursued by education than by crude attempts at control and surveillance (see Davies & Merchant, 2009 for a fuller discussion). As Bryant suggests, it is often the case that teenagers:

‘...are more knowledgeable than the people telling them what they can and cannot do.’

(Bryant 2007:16)

And this point was elaborated on by one of the teachers in my own study who argued that:

‘because they know far more about it, they know how to get round our firewalls, they know if things are blocked how to get in there how to access it, and they speak this language on the message wall that I don’t understand. It is a whole new language, so it is interesting that they would be the ones to teach us about E-safety’

Who is taking SNSs seriously?

Given the growing significance of SNSs in students’ lives it is important to look at the influences that frame educational responses to the new literacies involved. Some of the difficulties that educators may face in drawing on these student experiences in the context of formal learning may be beyond their control, constrained as they are by curriculum and assessment regimes as well as institutional policies - but there are also some other areas of difficulty. Firstly, there is the perceived danger of unfiltered and open access to online interaction, fuelled as it is by moral panic over internet safety. Secondly, there is the suspicion, still felt in some quarters, of anything that smacks of popular culture in which young people are often more expert than teachers. Thirdly there is lack of knowledge or familiarity - to some extent, online social-networking is still seen as the province of the

young and a foreign country to some teachers. Finally there are relatively few models of good practice to draw upon. Yet when we think that the popularity of social networking sites stems from the way they provide a context for friendship and affinity around shared interest, and see how they are spaces in which self-directed learning *can* take place, they begin to seem more attractive. They clearly provide opportunities for geographically and temporally dispersed groups and individuals to communicate, exchange information and develop ideas, and from this perspective, we may be able to glimpse some new ways of structuring learning communities.

It is easy to underestimate the fundamental shift in teachers' working practices that social software invites. However, those who have responded to the challenge are often enthusiastic. A quick look at the ways in which creative teachers have explored the educational potential of Twitter is a case in point. Examples are as varied as Steve Rayburn's approach to teaching Dante (University Laboratory High School, 2009); Will Richard's Twitter Latin test (bigtweet.com, 2009); and Many Voices, the collaborative story initiated by an elementary school teacher in Maryland (twitter.com, 2009). A more polished approach is offered by TwHistory which in one project presents sequenced messages from key players in the American Civil War. Figure 3 is a screen shot of some of these Twitter messages (tweets). On their information page the designers explain that:

'Twitter is being used for many things. Here at TwHistory we feel the service can be a novel way to tell the stories of our past. We pick historical figures, especially those that kept detailed journals or histories, and tweet the experiences they went through.'

(Twhistory.com, 2009)

Here we get the sense of a carefully planned initiative that takes full cognizance of the particular affordances of time-based message posting in a social networking service.

Other examples of educational uses of SNSs are poorly documented, but include the use of music and video-sharing sites to host students' digital media projects. By providing a wider audience for these sorts of products, students may well attract a broader range of critical comment as well, of course, as exposing themselves to unfiltered reactions. Sensitive teachers can alert their classes to this possibility, perhaps using this as an opportunity to guide students in becoming more critical online readers and more responsible in their peer-to-peer interactions. A strong advantage of this sort of internet publication is that learners can view their work at home and often decide to share it with family members. Educational uses of Facebook confer similar advantages and disadvantages. Teachers can use Facebook in the classroom by creating a group for their class. The whole class will then be able to interact with each other and post new information on the wall. The potential to add hyperlinks, pictures and videos makes this an attractive option.

More than anything, teachers will need to consider, and experiment with different ways of using and adapting SNSs, and they will need support and encouragement to do so. From my

own work, it seems that some are beginning to see what this could be. In the words of one of our teachers:

‘I think that if you can get students interested and engaged through media, you may have to back track to get what you want, you may have to dip into their world and then reel them back into yours so [...] you [...] embraced the text culture - I think yeah I am going to have to think like that a little bit because dipping into their world gets what you want out of them’



Figure 3 :President Lincoln tweets from the Battle of Gettysburg (<http://www.twhistory.com/>)

Why educators should know about social networking

This initial exploration of how young people and their teachers are using SNSs provides a number of areas of interest for educators which are broadly suggestive of three kinds of activity in educational settings. The first of these is to *learn about* SNSs and their role in learners’ lives – doing this is an essential ingredient in the work of understanding the worlds that our students inhabit and in recognising the knowledge, skills and dispositions that are involved as social and cultural capital. Although many schools currently bar access to SNSs, a recent study by the National School Boards Association (2007) revealed that 60% of the 9-17 year-olds they surveyed used these online spaces to discuss educational topics. This underlines the imperative to recognise and validate the learning that takes place in SNSs

(Owen et al., 2006) and to realize that the purely social sits alongside more informal learning.

The second kind of activity is to *learn from* social networking in order to appreciate the kinds of social interaction and informal learning SNSs can support, and as a result to reflect upon and refresh our own pedagogies and designs for learning, whether or not these involve new technologies. Some of the examples included above show some early attempts to use SNSs - but more thought could be given to the development of applications that will support educational activity.

The third and final area of activity is to *learn with* SNSs, and by this I mean to focus in a critical way on the literacy practices that are developing in and around social networking, as well as the identities that are produced and performed through the various acts of multimodal and collaborative textual composition. This last area of activity is, as we have seen, entirely consistent with the well-established approaches and analytical frameworks associated with critical literacy and media studies.

Despite claims that the social web is a rich space for informal learning, to date there has been little serious attention paid to the form or nature of that learning. Researchers such as boyd, (2007), Carrington (2008,) Merchant (2007b), and Davies (2006) have all *described* the learning that takes place, but no model has been developed yet to theorize this learning. At the same time, however, there is growing evidence of innovative educators using Web 2.0 and social networking applications in the classroom (Lankshear and Knobel, 2006a) - but it must be said that these are small gains in a political and educational environment that often sees ICT as a solution to all its problems - from providing for employment and skills shortages, to 'curing' pupil disaffection and under-achievement.

The focus of this chapter has been on the use of popular SNSs and I have attempted to underline some of the key characteristics of their use and how these may relate to education. In the introduction I emphasised the broad appeal of online social networking in a world in which one's position on the 'social graph' (Fitzpatrick, 2007) - the global mapping of everybody and how they're related – seems to count for a lot. Whilst I have drawn attention to the realities of occasional, persistent or even reluctant engagement, as well as the presence of those who refuse to participate, there may well be a further role for education in ensuring that those students, who for one reason or another do not have access to SNSs are not disadvantaged as a result. The right not to participate should, I believe, be upheld, but the opportunity to learn and develop through social networks should not be withheld.

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