Chapter 73
Meeting Them Halfway:
Using Social Networking to Connect with Students

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ABSTRACT

Computer mediated communication (CMC), especially via Web 2.0 technologies like social networking and casting software, has become an essential part of the lives of the current generation of college students. This chapter will explore the possibilities for the use of these technologies by universities and colleges to connect with their students and to enhance instruction. Topics covered will include Facebook, Twitter, virtual worlds, casting software, and future trends.

INTRODUCTION

The development of the Internet and computer mediated communication (CMC) may be one of the most significant influences on higher education in the last 30 years (Hendley, 2000). Everett Rogers, in his seminal work on the diffusion of innovation through society, coined the term "early adopter" to describe those individuals who, while not the creators of new technology, are among the first to adopt new innovations into their daily lives, and serve as role models for others (1983, pp. 248-249). The qualities Rogers assigns to his "early adopter" category are qualities often found in academic environments: the ability to deal with abstract ideas, rationality, intelligence, favorable attitudes toward education and science, higher achievement motivation and high aspirations (1983, pp. 257-258).

As institutions that attract the early adopter type, colleges and universities – and in particular their students – have been at the forefront of the information revolution. The incorporation of computer-based technologies into the college classroom and library is also nothing new. From the replacement of the card catalog with the Online Public Access Catalog (OPAC) to the submission of assignments through email, e-textbooks and e-journals, course management systems, and fully web-based distance education, the electronic world has been rapidly incorporating itself into the traditional educational arena for years.

The "Net Generation" (also called Generation Y, Millennials, Bridgers, and NextGens) – those with birthdates range from 1982 to 2002 (Jones, 2008, p. 64) – and the emergence of "Web 2.0," or the interactive web, have made a whole new world of electronic communication open up. It is a world that is central to the lives of today's college students, the majority of whom were raised in a world in which technology was a pre-established part of everyday life, the extent to which has only increased during their lifetime (Alemaïn & Wartman, 2008, p. 1). A recent study found that 90.3% of undergraduates use social networking sites to communicate with friends and acquaintances (Caruso, Smith, & Salaway, 2009, p. 14). While our students use computer mediated communication as much, possibly even more than traditional forms of communication, faculty members, many who remember a time before the Internet revolution, may find these tools less than intuitive.

New CMC tools develop rapidly and their impacts can be unpredictable – technologies and services that show great initial promise may either completely fail to catch on or be quickly toppled by competitors (such as Friendster, whose initial popularity was quickly eclipsed by MySpace and Facebook), while another product getting off to a slow start may become a mainstay of the digital arsenal (Twitter, for example). Well-meaning and dedicated educators, in an attempt to reach their students on the students' own home ground, can quickly lose their bearings in a maze of websites and services, where the learning curve for one not raised as part of the Net Generation can be high.

While keeping pace with new technologies can be challenging, universities that ignore social networking tools do so at their peril. Heather Mansfield, who regularly consults for colleges and universities on social media, warns "If colleges don't start profiles for their school on Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, etc., then an alum or current student will do it for them [...] they run the risk of losing complete control of their brand online (Gilroy, 2010, p. 21)."

In this chapter, I examine a number of computer mediated communication software programs that are being used by the current generation of college and university students, and examine how these tools can be adapted to the educational arena in general and the classroom in particular. While I acknowledge the importance of email and instant messaging as methods of computer mediated communication in education, I focus specifically on Facebook, Twitter, and virtual worlds, while also touching upon podcasting, videocasting, and screencasting, and noting possible future trends.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF WEB 2.0

While the Internet properly began with the development of ARPANET in 1969 and more importantly the development of the Internetwork Protocol (IP) in 1974, it really was not until the late 1980s and early 1990s that computers with Internet access became common household items (Alemaïn & Wartman, 2008, pp. 14-15). With the early Internet, the general user was primarily a consumer of information, not a producer. The development of Internet Browsers (Mosaic in 1990, Netscape, Internet Explorer, Firefox and others soon after) allowed the non-specialist to load and view web pages relatively easily, but at this time, it still took specialized knowledge to actually construct a web page (p. 17).

The development of what has been alternately called "Web 2.0" and the "participatory web" has dramatically changed the nature of the Internet. New technologies began to be developed that allowed those with little or even no programming knowledge to create and post their own content online. Email, the earliest version of computer mediated communication, began to be supplemented by Web 2.0 technologies that not only allowed the uninitiated user to create content, but also provided a mechanism for users to comment upon others' content and to communicate with other site owners (Pankl & Ryan, 2008, p. 847).

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