

Multimedia and Internet @ Schools

Pipeline Column:

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What Can MySpace Teach Us in School Libraries

First, a musical interlude . . .

*Bows and flows of angel hair and ice cream castles in the air
And feather canyons everywhere, I've looked at clouds that way.
But now they only block the sun, they rain and snow on everyone.
So many things I would have done but clouds got in my way.
I've looked at clouds from both sides now,
From up and down, and still somehow
It's cloud illusions I recall. I really don't know clouds at all.*

*Joni Mitchell
Both Sides Now*

Well, this excerpt from a song from my youth certainly expresses how things feel today. Everything keeps turning upside down. Just when you think you understand the current change dynamic and the web and the Internet, it goes all kerflooey again! Everything that I think I understood from one perspective, looks completely different from another view.

I got nice and comfortable with websites and learning mobile applications, blogging, and downloading streaming media then everything mutates yet again! Sometimes I think to myself, "WILL IT EVER END?" Well we all know that answer to that question. Nope. We could rent the Unabomber's cabin and hide out there for years and still I think change will find us. Change is the constant and it's as true today as when Heraclitus made that observation about life in Greece 2500 years ago. If it was true 2500 years ago, and it's true today, then resistance might truly be futile. So we must adapt.

So, what engendered this dire mood about my prognostications of the future? I was discussing my online presence with my daughter and asking her about her's – subtly testing that she's guarding her privacy and that her teen online musings won't turn up in her interview with the Board chairman to become CEO of *Virtual Presence*, an as yet unfounded company in the year 2036. As usual she caught me off guard about how she had just recruited all of her friends to discard their MySpace sites and migrate to The Facebook. "Why?" I asked in barely disguised mute shock (since I had just been contemplating my own personal MySpace site as a weekend project and was wondering if I was missing a trend or sticking with a fad). "Because you can avoid the nuts more easily, it's cooler and not so

teenybopper and MySpace is just, well, more private for us. We love Facebook.” So, there you have it. I don’t think this is a fad – by a long shot. I think it’s still a long term trend and a very strong one. Why do I think that? I think that because it’s evolving. Fads don’t evolve, trends do. Hula Hoops were a fad, and besides different colors, stripes and whistling hoops, they didn’t evolve too much. Pet rocks didn’t evolve too much either. Same with rat finks, Pogs, and trolls. So, let’s explore the meaning of these amazing spaces that have captured the vast majority of the Millennial market place so quickly.

Sometimes it seems that new manifestations of the web phenomena trot out their presence every day. And the wags, commentators and critics trot out just as quickly in their wake. The hot topic of the month is web environments like MySpace, the Facebook, Second Life, Teen Second Life and the whole gamut of school based social networking sites like Classmates.com. Notice that I am not calling these websites. I am specifically calling these environments because there is a specific evolution happening here that, while still just nascent, needs to be watched. It’s basic to how virtual neighborhoods, networks and communities and building stickiness, collaboration and social context. It’s not fully evolved yet but we will soon start seeing the segmentation of social sites from destination websites as normal. It’s as basic as the differentiation of information and learning, content and context and information delivery and human interaction. It’s exciting to watch and it is even more essential to understand if we hope to adapt to a changing world.

Those are kids’ sites you scream! What do they have to do with school libraries, learning and teaching and the serious work of education? A lot, I think. Either way, it just isn’t wise to ignore them and it certainly can’t hurt to study the spaces being created by this generation, collaboratively, to meet their social needs. To dismiss these social phenomena without looking at them a little to see what the source of their success is, to my mind, foolish. I, for one, learned from our mistakes in dismissing trendsetters like AltaVista, Napster, Google, Web 2.0, and more and not learning that these trends and innovations contained the seeds of changes that were to materially change my world.

A little about just MySpace.

MySpace is busier than Google. It is reported that it gets about 2 to 3 times the traffic of Google daily. It’s bigger than traditional blogging and more blog postings are done inside MySpace than all other blog combined. And it’s growing like Tribbles. There are over 150,000 new MySpace accounts being created daily – yes daily! At current growth rates it has the potential to define social space (and not just virtual social space) for the majority of people. MySpace and The Facebook combined are reported to cover over 85% of all students in high school through college. And they are connecting to each other – and not just casual connections but sustainable, global connections for life. Networks of social networks – not just inter-networked information. Specifically MySpace is

an organized space to personalize your interests and activities on the web. It includes the ability to browse, search, invite friends to connect and interact, share film reviews, comments, mail, blog entries, favorites, discussions, events, videos, ratings, music and classified ads. It takes individual features and functions that resemble stand-alone applications like *del.icio.us*, *Flickr*, *YouTube*, *Blogger*, *gMail*, etc. and puts them into a useful space that just makes 'sense'. And it has gone mobile. By one wag's estimate, MySpace could account for 40% of web traffic by the end of 2006. That's a great deal of interaction.

MySpace appears to be the site of choice for teens and Millennials. *The Facebook* seems to be successfully capturing the biggest part of the college and university demographic. In the sidebar to this column you can see even more advanced 'spaces' for this demographic that seek to combine gaming metaphors with social and e-commerce activities. Check out *Second Life* and *Teen Second Life*. If the gaming style complexity feels overwhelming, just play with the single applications that use social networks to create collaboration spaces like *Pandora* for music or *Flickr* for pictures or *del.icio.us* for bookmarks.

Why am I looking at this kiddy stuff, you ask? What can it possibly teach me about providing excellent service to my users/learners/students that have serious learning needs at school, college and university? Good question. And like all good questions, it generates more questions.

In the school library context we relate to our clients on many levels. We provide personal service – sometimes in person, or via phone, e-mail, IM, etc. We provide products like books, classes, databases, collections, pointers, web pages, websites, software tools, and more. And we offer special services like research support, training, information coaching and more. But – fundamentally – we and our resources and services usually exist inside a larger organization – a *social organization* that supports society and the larger social context with it is through schools, school boards, or state or provincial departments of education. In this context we can ask ourselves the following questions about Web 2.0 and social networking services like MySpace and The Facebook:

1. Learning is essentially a social activity. It's not just about skills and competencies in isolation but these skills and competencies in the greater context of society. What are these web environments doing right with respect to institutionalizing social networks? How do they get social networks and links to self create and make themselves visible? How do they so successfully straddle the informal/formal social dynamic? We have to admit that the social and workplace networks in our traditional institutions can be quite opaque and difficult to access and navigate comprehensively. What are these sites doing that is encouraging networks to form and be explicit? What is that encourages content creating and sharing on such a high level?

2. We are constantly trying to market and advertise and encourage wise and safe use of our resources, public websites and search tools. Here are sites that have exponential growth, and growth that has occurred amazingly quickly, with just about word-of-mouth as their only communication strategy. They now dominate the Millennial space. What makes these sites so successful that people want to participate and share? We have discussed knowledge sharing and how to encourage more knowledge sharing among learners ad nauseum. Why is it like pulling teeth to have them make a speech or present a paper in class and they willingly create and share advanced content online? What are these sites doing right that students share willingly without financial and assessment rewards?
3. What makes these sites 'sticky'? What is the role of things like video and music in social networking and trust relationships? What role do these play in creating engaging environments? Why do people share so much in these spaces through blogging, events and even their own personal content creations? How does music fit in here? What is different here than at KaZaA, LimeWire or iTunes?
4. How do we get seminar or learner groups to connect in virtual environments? How do you build learning or classroom / course / grade teams to connect and collaborate easily and seamlessly like they get created in MySpace? What's the magic sauce?
5. These sites are exploring the issues of privacy and personal space in new ways. What can we learn about their efforts to create 'safe' spaces? MySpace recently created a Chief Safety Officer to work through concerns about privacy, stalking etc. Is there something here that can help us to create communities in our educational spaces that are safe, confidential, private, and still have permeable boundaries? How do we connect students together and still allow them to explore and discover and learn safely from the world's knowledge?
6. Most importantly, will these styles of web environments evolve into lifelong communities where people can sustain their learning and personal networks? What is the opportunity for driving or building learning environments using the insights we gain from these new iterations of web ecologies?
7. If we plan to be relevant to all generations, what is our opinion of MySpace now and what it can evolve into? Is there a generation gap developing in web-based environments? Are we worried about the balkanization of the web community? Will youth see those not in their community spaces as "out" or themselves as a new "elite". Is this a risk? Do MySpace style services have the potential to create a new Internet 'elite' where the well-connected rule or have a distinct advantage? What will all this mean in terms of society and work? It's just a question but it's worth exploring in my humble opinion.

Some recent examples of the potential of these initiatives have captured my attention and I'll share them with you:

- Do you YouTube? YouTube is a great site to see content created by students that they willingly share with others. It's addictive and very fun. Search "library" and see what kids are creating about us. It's fun, discouraging, encouraging and real. Just explore the site and see why they have the theme "Broadcast Yourself". This is a hint at the future of projects, essays, speeches and more.
- In April the Alliance Library System outside Chicago announced that they were creating a teen space using Second Life. Second Life and Teen Second Life are spaces where you can create a gaming style interface to your real and virtual content and environments. You're really adding new tricks to their bricks and clicks. This will be a very cool initiative to watch.
- At Internet @ School East in March, InfOhio discussed their new portal InfOhio SchoolRooms that will launch in September 2006. It's a learning environment that uses many of the tools you see in the MySpace type environments but does so in the service of learning. Gaming objects, interactive learning tools and content and context are assembled at the lesson level to support students' classroom and homework activities and goals. It's an exciting initiative that also involves parents, teachers and administrators and ultimately links to assessment tools.

There's a ton to learn from these high profile sites and initiatives. I am not suggesting that we adopt their style, practices and templates unthinkingly and without our foil hats attached firmly to our heads, but I do think there's a lot to learn here just by keeping an open mind. Indeed we shouldn't have to wait until the MySpace generation enters the workplace in droves to understand and meet their expectations for virtual workplace and lifelong learning space, networking, and content sharing. Looking at both sides is a strength.

*But now old friends are acting strange
They shake their heads, they say I've changed
Well something's lost, but something's gained
In living every day.*

*I've looked at life from both sides now
From win and lose, but still somehow
It's life's illusions I recall
I really don't know life at all.*

Joni Mitchell

Stephen Abram, MLS is Vice President, Innovation, for SirsiDynix and the incoming President–elect of SLA. He is an SLA Fellow and the past president of the Ontario Library Association and the immediate past president of the Canadian Library Association. Stephen would love to hear from you at stephen.abram@sirsidynix.com.

Websites Mentioned Above:

MySpace

<http://www.myspace.com>

“MySpace is an online community that lets you meet your friends' friends. Create a private community on MySpace and you can share photos, journals and interests with your growing network of mutual friends! See who knows who, or how you are connected. Find out if you really are six people away from Kevin Bacon. MySpace is for everyone:

- Friends who want to talk Online
- Single people who want to meet other Singles
- Matchmakers who want to connect their friends with other friends
- Families who want to keep in touch--map your Family Tree
- Business people and co-workers interested in networking
- Classmates and study partners
- Anyone looking for long lost friends!”

The Facebook

<http://www.facebook.com>

Facebook is an online directory that connects people through social networks at schools. It was launched to the public on Wednesday, February 4th, 2004.

Second Life

<http://secondlife.com>

“Second Life is a 3-D virtual world entirely built and owned by its residents. Since opening to the public in 2003, it has grown explosively and today is inhabited by nearly 100,000 people from around the globe.

- From the moment you enter the World you’ll discover a vast digital continent, teeming with people, entertainment, experiences and opportunity. Once you’ve explored a bit, perhaps you’ll find a perfect parcel of land to build your house or business.
- You’ll also be surrounded by the Creations of your fellow residents. Because residents retain the rights to their digital creations, they can buy, sell and trade with other residents.

- The Marketplace currently supports millions of US dollars in monthly transactions. This commerce is handled with the in-world currency, the Linden dollar, which can be converted to US dollars at several thriving online currency exchanges.“

Teen Second Life

<http://teen.secondlife.com>

“Teen Second Life is an international gathering place for teens 13-17 to make friends and to play, learn and create. In Second Life, teens can create and customize a digital self called an “avatar,” fly through an ever-changing 3D landscape, chat and socialize with other teens from all over the world, and build anything from skyscrapers to virtual vehicles. It’s more than a videogame and much more than an Internet chat program – it’s a boundless world of surprise and adventure that encourages teens to work together and use their imaginations.”

Classmates.com

<http://www.classmates.com>

It's Free! Over 200,000 schools and over 40 million friends! Find old friends. Reunion updates, lively message boards and high school, college, career and military directories.

YouTube

<http://www.youtube.com>

del.icio.us

<http://del.icio.us>

Flickr

<http://www.flickr.com>