

HEADS UP

Facing the Facebook

Unless we reassess our high-tech priorities, issues of student insensitivity, indiscretion, and fabrication will consume us

By MICHAEL J. BUGEJA

Information technology in the classroom was supposed to bridge digital divides and enhance student research. Increasingly, however, our networks are being used to entertain members of "the Facebook Generation" who text-message during class, talk on their cellphones during labs, and listen to iPods rather than guest speakers in the wireless lecture hall.

That is true at my institution, Iowa State University. With a total enrollment of 25,741, Iowa State logs 20,247 registered users on Facebook (see <http://www.facebook.com>), which bills itself as "an online directory that connects people through social networks at schools."

While I'd venture to say that most of the students on any campus are regular visitors to Facebook, many professors and administrators have yet to hear about Facebook, let alone evaluate its impact.

On many levels, Facebook is fascinating—an interactive, image-laden directory featuring groups that share lifestyles or attitudes. Many students find it addictive, as evidenced by discussion groups with names like "Addicted to the Facebook," which boasts 330 members at Iowa State. Nationwide, Facebook tallies 250 million hits every day and ranks ninth in overall traffic on the Internet.

That kind of social networking affects all levels of academe:

- Institutions seeking to build enrollment learn that "technology" rates higher than "rigor" or "reputation" in high-school focus groups. That may pressure provosts to continue investing in technology rather than in tenure-track positions.
- Professors and librarians encounter improper use of technology by students, and some of those cases go to judiciary officials who enforce the student code.
- Career and academic advisers must deal with employers and parents who have screened Facebook and discovered what users have been up to in residence halls.
- Academics assessing learning outcomes often discover that technology is as much a distraction in the classroom as a tool.

To be sure, classroom distractions have plagued teachers in less technological times. In my era, there was the ubiquitous comic book hidden in a boring text. A comic book

cannot compare with a computer, of course. Neither did it require university money at the expense of faculty jobs.

John W. Curtis, research director at the American Association of University Professors, believes that investment in technology is one of several factors responsible for the well-documented loss of tenured positions in the past decade.

Facebook is not the sole source of those woes. However, it is a Janus-faced symbol of the online habits of students and the traditional objectives of higher education, one of which is to inspire critical thinking in learners rather than multitasking. The situation will only get worse as freshmen enter our institutions weaned on high-school versions of Facebook and equipped with gaming devices, iPods, and other portable technologies.

Michael Tracey, a journalism professor at the University of Colorado, recounts a class discussion during which he asked how many people had seen the previous night's *NewsHour* on PBS or read that day's *New York Times*. "A couple of hands went up out of about 140 students who were present," he recalls. "One student chirped: 'Ask them how many use Facebook.' I did. Every hand in the room went up. She then said: 'Ask them how many used it today.' I did. Every hand in the room went up. I was amazed."

Christine Rosen, a fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center, in Washington, D.C., believes experiences like that are an example of what she calls "egocasting, the thoroughly personalized and extremely narrow pursuit of one's personal taste." Facebook "encourages egocasting even though it claims to further 'social networking' and build communities," she says. Unlike real communities, however, most interactions in online groups do not take place face-to-face. It's no surprise, she says, that "people who use networks like Facebook have a tendency to describe themselves like products."

To test that, I registered on the Iowa State Facebook and noticed that the discussion groups looked a lot like direct mailing lists. Some, in fact, were the same or barely distinguishable from mailing lists compiled in *The Lifestyle Market Analyst*, a reference book that looks at potential audiences for advertisers. For instance, "Baseball Addicts" and "Kick Ass Conservatives" are Facebook groups, while "Baseball Fanatics" and "Iowa Conservatives" are the names of commercial mailing lists. You can find "PC Gamers," "Outdoor Enthusiasts," and advocates for and against gun control on both Facebook and in marketing directories. "It is ironic," Rosen says, "that the technologies we embrace and praise for the degree of control they give us individually also give marketers and advertisers the most direct window into our psyche and buying habits they've ever had."

Online networks like Facebook allow high levels of surveillance, she adds, and not just for marketers. "College administrators are known to troll the profiles on Facebook for evidence of illegal behavior by students," she says. "Students might think they are merely crafting and surfing a vast network of peers, but because their Facebook profile is, in essence, a public diary, there is nothing to stop anyone else—from marketers, to parents, to college officials—from reading it."

Her comments bear out. For instance, a panel at the University of Missouri at Columbia has been formed to educate students about Facebook content that may violate student-conduct policies or local laws. A Duquesne University student was asked to write a paper because the Facebook group he created was deemed homophobic. Students at Northern Kentucky University were charged with code violations when a keg was seen in a dorm-room picture online.

My concerns are mostly ethical. In my field, I know of students who showcase inappropriate pictures of partners or use stereotypes to describe themselves and others on Facebook. What does that mean in terms of taste, sensitivity, and bias? I know of disclosures about substance abuse that have come back to haunt students under investigation for related offenses. I know of fictitious Facebook personae that masquerade as administrators, including college presidents.

Facebook forbids such fabrications. According to Chris Hughes, a spokesman, misrepresentation is against the directory's "Terms of Service."

"In other words," he says, "you can't create a profile for Tom Cruise using your account. When users report a profile, we take a look and decide if the content seems authentic. If not, we'll remove the user from the network."

Shortly after interviewing Hughes, I heard from Michael Tracey, the Colorado journalism professor, who learned that an account had been opened in his name on MySpace (see <http://www.myspace.com>), another networking site, "with photos and all kinds of weird details." He suspects a student from the course he spoke with me about is behind the ruse.

Unless we reassess our high-tech priorities, issues associated with insensitivity, indiscretion, bias, and fabrication will consume us in higher education.

Christine Rosen believes that college administrators "have embraced technology as a means of furthering education, but they have failed to realize that the younger generation views technology largely as a means of delivering entertainment—be it music, video games, Internet access, or television—and secondarily, as a means of communicating."

What can we do in the short term about the misuse of technology, especially in wireless locales?

The Facebook's spokesman, Hughes, is not overly concerned. He notes that students who use computers in classrooms and labs routinely perform "a host of activities online while listening to lectures," like checking e-mail, sending instant messages, or reading the news.

"Usage of Facebook during class," he says, "doesn't strike me as being that different than usage of those other tools."

"If professors don't want their students to have access to the Internet during class," Hughes adds, "they can remove wireless installations or ask their students not to bring computers to class."

Some less-drastic measures include clauses in syllabi warning against using Facebook or other nonassigned Internet sites during class. Some professors punish students who violate such rules and reward those who visit the library. Others have stopped using technology in the classroom. A few institutions are assessing how to respond to Facebook and similar digital distractions. Last fall the University of New Mexico blocked access to Facebook because of security concerns. My preference is not to block content but to instill in students what I call "interpersonal intelligence," or the ability to discern when and where technology may be appropriate or inappropriate.

That, alas, requires critical thinking and suggests that we have reached a point where we must make hard decisions about our investment in technology and our tradition of high standards. Because the students already have.

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