

Faculty Insider—*The Social-Networking Trend*

Table of Contents

Faculty Insider.....	1
Tech Tip.....	3
Get Involved.....	3
Did You Know.....	4
NAC Corner.....	4
The Power of One.....	5
Curriculum Bonus.....	6

There has been a recent rise in the awareness of social-networking sites and the issues involved in their use by youth. i-SAFE has stayed abreast of the current trends in online usage and will be releasing several new lessons with its 2006–2007 curriculum to cover the various aspects of social networking. Here, we will explore the topic with you, the educator.

Social networking is the practice of expanding the number of one’s business and/or social contacts. Let’s face it, social networking is nothing new. It’s a component of what makes us human—our desire to communicate and connect with others. The use of the Internet to accomplish this isn’t new, either. People have been reaching out and finding others with common interests online for years. So why is there all this hullabaloo surrounding the new social-networking sites found online?

First, one must understand that the Internet is integral to the socialization and networking of kids and teens. Take for example these 2005–2006 survey results from i-SAFE’s National Assessment Center (NAC):

- 81% of elementary-school students in grades 3 through 4 go online at least once a week.
- 33% of high-school students in grades 9 through 12 visit chat rooms.
- 31% of students in grades 5 through 12 have a personal web page, while 27% have personal web blogs.
- 28% of students in grades 5 through 12 have sent instant messages (IMs) over the Internet late at night when their parents thought they were asleep.

These impressive statistics reflect the fact that our youth do a large amount of their social networking online. What we need to remember is that social networking isn’t bad; it’s a way of life. It isn’t some-



thing that just kids do. Think about your own life. How do you network on a social level? Is it in the teachers’ lounge, at your church, at the gym? Remember: We all network. But beyond that, what is NOT said about networking is that there are unwritten rules and hidden subcurrents. This is typically true of any network built for socializing. And forgetting or not knowing these rules are what can lead to trouble.

When it comes to online social networking, a number of sites have been around for quite awhile. Have a new baby? Hop online and connect with parents all around the world. If you need to know information about the car you just bought, chances are

continued on page 2

NAC Tracks

Is it possible for your students to learn inappropriate things about your personal life because you are a member of a social-networking site?

Vote here



“Knowledge is power. Rather, knowledge is happiness. To have knowledge, deep broad knowledge, is to know truth from false and lofty things from low.”

~ Helen Keller

The Social-Networking Trend *continued from page 1*

there is a forum devoted just to that. However, on the forefront and in the news recently are those sites whose ONLY purpose is to promote social communication. MySpace, Xanga, Facebook, Friendster, etc., are some of the names of these “new” sites.

So what is so new about these type of sites? The fact that the format promotes making new “unknown” acquaintances and interacting and networking with them. Most of these sites are loaded with search features that make it easy to “find” someone. These sites are all about popularity, talking, interaction, and more, and the users tend to forget that these online interactions can be viewed by anyone.

So if social networking isn’t bad or wrong, why are so many negative issues popping up about these sites? One reason is because of the nature of the Internet. Students feel a sense of freedom, a unique identity they can form that hides the real them and creates a freeing sense of anonymity.

The trouble is that students are using online social networks as online diaries, forgetting that REAL people are reading these thoughts. They are exploring their sexuality, personas, and identities in front of an online audience, and they’re pushing the boundaries. Of most concern is that they have little concept that this is a public arena with rules and boundaries.


Online communities require you to provide personal information. When you register for an online community, whether an e-mail list or a chat group, you are required to fill in certain basic pieces of personal information. The most basic usually includes a user name, e-mail address, and password. However, more information is typically imparted as a person interacts in the community and profiles are viewed. Most online communities request or even demand a profile. This profile contains personal information that is not only available to members but to anyone else who cares to search. And this isn’t the end of the “Great Reveal.” Youth get caught in the moment online and tend to post revealing pictures, blog about their personal lives, meet new people, and unknowingly divulge too much information, which leaves them vulnerable.

So what is the biggest issue associated with social networks? As with any Internet use, there is the issue of who is viewing your personal information and what they plan to do with it. Is it a cyber bully, a predator, or a criminal with intentions of identity theft? By participating in an online community, you are building a level of trust. But participation in such a community can make one vulnerable to scams and spam. Furthermore, many people don’t realize that these sites serve as a permanent record of comments. Despite the casual and familiar feel of some communities, information like kids’ names, workplace or school names, or vacation time is also being revealed to others. Even information regarding health and money can be viewed by others weeks, months,



or even years from now. Some college recruiters and workplace employers conduct searches before hiring or accepting applicants! These sites have become a searchable database for anyone with any motive or purpose.

Although there are quite a few issues and problems associated with social networking, it is important to remember that social networks aren’t all bad. They can help a young person build up their self-confidence and break out of their shells. Online networks help students explore the importance of communication and networking skills. Students can also become more tech-savvy by learning how to create web pages and blogs. In fact, social networks have been used for many good purposes by teens. Online, they can express and explore their political views and become a part of the greater world community. Social-networking sites have also been used as support networks for those who are ill or are facing critical issues.

In the end, it all comes down to education and awareness. If we raise our youth to understand and acknowledge the dangers of online participation, they will make smarter decisions when they participate in online social networking. Telling them they can’t take part isn’t an option—social networking is around to stay. Instead, let’s guide them toward making healthy decisions about how to best use this wonderful technology. 

Tech Tip—P2P Pitfalls and Protections

Q One of the teachers I correspond with has some lesson plans that I want to get. She says that she uses a program called LimeWire and that I can download the lesson plans using this software. I asked her to e-mail them, but I guess they are too large. What is this LimeWire, and is it safe?

A LimeWire is a Gnutella Network client, which is a type of peer-to-peer (P2P) file-sharing network. P2P file-sharing allows users to share files online through an informal network of computers running the same client software, in this case LimeWire. Peer-to-peer file-sharing can give you instant access to a wealth of information, but it does have its pitfalls. Unknowingly, you could be downloading copyrighted materials, pornography, even files infected with viruses. You could also make the mistake of allowing people to copy files from your computer that you didn't intend to share. Don't fret; there are steps you can take to mitigate some of the risks. First, set up the file-sharing client software very carefully, then check the sharing setting closely so that you're not giving access to your private files. Make sure that you have antivirus and antispyware software on your computer and that the definition files are up to date. Finally, close your connection when you don't need it. Some P2P clients have automatic start-up and will begin running as soon as you turn on your computer. Make sure that you set it to connect only when you start the program. This will limit the ability of others to copy your shared files. Having a firewall on your computer and/or network is a good idea, as it will add another layer of protection.

Get Involved—Our New Virtual Training Academy




As an educator, you are always looking for ways to stay one step ahead of your students. For many teachers, time spent out of the classroom for professional development can set them back. i-SAFE offers a revolutionary way to receive professional development without ever having to leave the classroom. i-SAFE's Virtual Training Academy allows educators to receive live instruction with other educators, all from the comfort of their own computers. The Virtual Professional Development Program delivers the same sought-after

professional development that i-SAFE provides. But instead of you coming to us, we come to you! Upon completing a Virtual PDP, you will be certified to train others using our train-the-trainer model. Follow the easy steps below to bring i-SAFE to your schools!

Here's How to Sign Up for a VTA Session . . .

1. Log in to i-SAFE's Web site (www.isafe.org) with your user name and password. Click "Return to Home."
2. Go to "Choose a PC" on the upper right, and click on the "Virtual Training Academy" PC.
3. Click "Calendar" at the bottom of the page.
4. Choose the event you would like to attend, and click under "Sign Up."
5. Click "Confirm."

When you register for a VTA session, you will receive an e-mail with the information needed to attend that session and a reminder e-mail the day before your event with any materials you will need to download for your session.

Upon completion of your session, you will be i-SAFE certified. You will then submit an implementation plan and will receive the free resources and curriculum. It's that easy! 

Did You Know?—i-SAFE and Law Enforcement Join Forces

Recognizing the growing threat posed by online sexual predators, child pornography, and other crimes against children through the Internet, U.S. Attorney General Alberto Gonzales recently announced the Project Safe Childhood Initiative. To assist the Justice Department's grassroots effort, i-SAFE has made available the "Project Safe Childhood Toolkit." This toolkit provides law-enforcement officials and prosecutors across the country i-SAFE materials so they can take a proactive approach in preventing online crimes by educating and empowering their communities on how to respond to these growing threats. The "Project Safe Childhood Toolkit" will be used by law enforcement and prosecutors to increase awareness about the dangers children face while online and to promote responsible and safe Internet use.

At the same time, i-SAFE's Operation i-SHIELD brings together the nation's law-enforcement community and prosecutors to help proactively fight Internet crimes against children. Regional i-SHIELD Task Forces develop strategies to educate their local communities to raise awareness and promote Internet safety. While each i-SHIELD Task Force acts independently, it is part of a cooperative network of Task Forces across the United States that shares information about crime trends, data, and strategies through an interactive e-bulletin board set up for them. i-SAFE provides training through our i-LEARN Online training program (<http://ilearn.isafe.org>), along with resources and materials that a Task Force needs to accomplish its community education



and outreach strategies.

i-SAFE believes that when we help provide the law-enforcement community the educational and outreach tools needed to proactively prevent Internet crime, their own resources can be re-allocated to crime-fighting and catching criminals who victimize children online. Interested law-enforcement officials can sign up to be on an i-SHIELD Task Force at www.isafe.org.



NAC Corner—The Future of Social Networking

Two years ago, "social-networking" sites were little known to mainstream Internet users. Yet these sites are now among the most popular places to visit on the entire Internet. During the 2005–06 academic year, i-SAFE surveyed nearly 15,000 students in grades 5 through 12 and found that nearly one-third (31%) had their own personal web page, which was often located on a social-networking site. Given the explosive popularity of social networking, that percentage should increase sharply during the next year. We also expect a rise in risky online behaviors because of the nature of social-networking sites, which assist members in meeting strangers and interacting with them in multiple ways (e.g. blogs, chat rooms, and instant messaging). In the absence of guidance, training, and fresh reminders,

children and adolescents do not often recognize the potential dangers in posting their photos on the Web or in providing Internet strangers with their true names, hometowns, addresses, names of their schools, and class schedules. There has never been a more urgent time to instruct your students about the dangers of revealing personal information online. No one wants to predict a rise in cyber stalking, cyber predation, and other cyber nightmares. But without enhanced education and outreach, such a scenario may prove to be one result of the social-networking phenomenon. We can't prevent today's youth from becoming online victims, but we can empower them to make safe and responsible decisions about how they communicate and represent themselves on the Internet.



The Power of One

Socializing Online

The good, bad, and ugly on the World Wide Web are oftentimes hard to visualize. The Internet offers so much—you have the ability to chat with your friends, learn new things, exchange ideas with different types of people, even meet new people and have tons of fun. But many times when someone is online, he or she doesn't really know who is on the other end. Just as there are positives, there are also negatives to the Internet. You should be aware that there are risky situations and dangers that you should avoid. If there were a way for the "Social Internet" to identify itself and let people know about the ups and downs, things would be easier. But because it's not clear, here's an inside look at the impact that social networking on the Internet has had on my friends, including a couple of tips I think could help.

Johnny, a young teenager and former member of a social-networking group, admits that he first joined the site to meet girls his age and because all of his friends from school belonged to it, too. He acknowledges that initially, he began to:

- spend more than four hours a day on the Internet
- lose interest in things other than the Internet
- become distracted while on the Internet
- become obsessed with the Internet

Now, Johnny says he regrets joining the site, saying: "It was a waste of time; I could have been doing my homework or trying to raise my grades up. I could have been doing something productive." But not all situations end in disappointment. For example: One of my friends took all that social networking on the Internet had to offer and used it

"It was a waste of time; I could have been doing my homework or trying to raise my grades up. I could have been doing something productive."

to better herself and her life. Anna was never known to be fun or outgoing—she was the girl who was too shy to even have fun. When she ventured onto the Internet and into a social-networking site, it opened up a whole new world. Being able to have fun online and meeting new people ultimately gave her the confidence to act the same way in the real world.

- She learned to speak her mind.
- She became more confident.
- She was able to talk to all types of people.



After hearing my friends' experiences, I hope you have a better understanding about what the "Social Internet" is and how it really works. Here are some tips I think could help anyone who wants to surf the Internet more safely.

1. Keep your personal info private.
2. Never meet with anyone you meet on the Web in person.
3. Be careful what you write.
4. Don't be too trusting.

KIDS ON THE INTERNET

- 58% of students admit to using the Internet unsafely, inappropriately, or illegally.*
- 80% of students spend at least one hour per week on the Internet.**
- 12% of students have unsupervised Internet access at school.**
- 55% of students report having given out personal information (e.g. name, age, gender, home address) to someone they have only met online.***
- 31% of students have a personal web page.***

* Based on a 2005–06 survey of 11,900 students in grades 5 through 12.

** Based on a 2004–05 survey of 36,000 students in grades 5 through 12.

*** Based on a 2005–06 survey of 12,000 students in grades 5 through 12.

Curriculum Bonus—*Online Networking*



Our new curriculum, coming out in August, will have several new lessons dealing with online social networking. These lessons will include information on social-networking sites, cyber citizenship issues, and more. One lesson will target negative networking. This month's curriculum bonus includes a preview of that lesson to get your students talking about networking issues and more!

To access the curriculum bonus, go to www.isafe.org/bonus.

Team Up With i-SAFE

Currently, i-SAFE has reached more than two million students with Internet safety information. By providing free materials, programs, and educational videos, students are learning how to make positive choices when challenged with today's technology. Not only are students learning to protect themselves against predators, they are also learning how to make decisions regarding intellectual property, identity theft, and more.

i-SAFE strives to provide educators, schools, and students with the most current information regarding the issues youth face today on the Internet. In order to bring our programs and materials to your school and community, we rely upon donations.

We would be grateful if you, or perhaps someone you know, could assist i-SAFE in reaching as many children as possible. Since i-SAFE is a 501(c)(3) corporation, your donations are fully tax deductible.

To donate, you can e-mail us at donations@isafe.org or go to www.isafe.org/donations.

We Value Your Input

Do you have a question or a comment about an article? Perhaps you have a story you wish to share with other readers. Do you know somebody whose story will inspire others to get involved? Whatever the case, we would like to know. Please e-mail us at editor@isafe.org with questions, comments, or contributions. If snail mail is your preference, **send written correspondence to:**

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About i-SAFE

Founded in 1998 and active in all 50 states, i-SAFE Inc. is the leader in Internet safety education. i-SAFE is a nonprofit foundation whose mission is to educate and empower students, parents, seniors, and community members to safely and responsibly take control of their Internet experiences. i-SAFE provides knowledge that will enable them to recognize and avoid dangerous, destructive, or unlawful online behavior, and to respond appropriately. This is accomplished through dynamic K through 12 curriculum and community-outreach programs to students, parents, law enforcement, and community leaders. i-SAFE is the only Internet safety foundation to combine these elements. www.isafe.org