

# **Teachers' Internet Presence: Risks and Challenges**

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## ***Introduction***

Growing trends in distributed learning, electronic databases and technology being so engrained in everyone's electronic lifestyle, Courville (2011) accounts for the hybrid nature of learning and working online. Learning online is having a large impact on the classroom integration of technology and social sharing on the Internet, like virtually all aspects of the computer/electronic revolution, is growing quickly. Cell phone technologies have become a substitute for many forms of desktop computing and social networking goes hand-in-hand with that convenience. Educators must adapt to the growing use of social networking and other forms of Internet presence in teaching.

## ***Background Issues***

The quickly evolving world of online educational opportunities is appealing to students and many tools and methods have been shown to be effective and positive for both content and affective concerns (Francom, Ryan & Kariuki, 2011). Podcasting, wikis, databases and of course social networking sites are just a few of the online resources and challenges available on the Internet. Teacher training continues to be a concern and seems always to be considered lacking in one respect or another (Steele, 2008). How can the internet be used most effectively in elementary classrooms? In middle schools? By students and by teachers? These and other important question must now also consider the role of social sharing sites which have become so prevalent.

Kushnir (2009) looked at e-learning and the online environments that provide some of these resources. In comparison to traditional classroom formats where students interact with a leader or teacher, electronic environments provide stimuli through a visual medium placing a different sort of stress on the learner. Kushnir found that high-stimulus environments can present a more extreme challenge to the learner. Surprisingly counter-intuitive, students with the greater degree of experience and knowledge of electronic learning technologies

experienced a greater negative impact of stimulus-rich environments in terms of levels of frustration and feeling overloaded.

How to make the best use of the Internet in classroom instruction is not a new issue but definitive answers are not self-evident nor as yet provided through research (Bisland, 2009). The availability of Internet resources brings more than its share of controversy and risk, either through failed and limited use or also by serious abuse and violation. The simple application of computers in the classroom is no longer the issue as an Internet presence expands the instructional and technological world beyond such a limited scope. A myriad of issues for educators expands faster than reliable and consistent answers even as educators struggle to maintain an effective Internet presence.

Russo (2009) examines a case of free speech issues where inappropriate comments posted on a teacher's social sharing site resulted in the teacher's termination. Clearly, what was viewed by the teacher as a freedom, perhaps an off-duty, "after hours," entitlement was viewed very differently by school administrators. The lines between personal freedoms and business personas, free speech and corporate policy, after-hours personal behavior and the scrutinized conduct of a professional identity are all very blurry and confused. This represents a considerable risk for all professionals who engage in online publications of anything, especially personal commentary. Yet, social sites not only encourage such indulgence but are indeed based on such behavior. Personal commentary, posting personal pictures, revealing personal details and more is the point of social networking and it is growing at an alarming speed.

Russo reports that a court upheld the rights of school administration to terminate teachers based on the content of their personal Internet social networking sites. So-called free-speech rights were set aside in favor of the school administration. Clearly, one's after-hours or off-duty behavior, including social sharing site activity, can have a dramatic effect on one's professional standing. It may seem obvious to most that being publically immoral or professionally unethical or being a public nuisance or engaging in various crimes and misdemeanors will have an eventual impact on one's career and professional standing. It may seem obvious that such behaviors are unacceptable and, more to the point, that such behavior will inevitably come to the attention of employers and others on whom our lifestyles depend. Yet, it can be misunderstood, when sitting alone in the privacy of one's own home typing

quietly on one's personal computer, that such online submissions are revealed to the world and still subject to professional scrutiny, judgment and the consequences that go with that.

Perhaps teachers do not have a sufficient awareness, understanding or realistic perception of such risks.

### ***Social Networking Sites (SNS)***

Facebook, Linked-In, MySpace and others bring a myriad of issues and responsibilities for teachers' personal lives and the integration of cyberspace into the classroom (Russo, 2009). Teachers have been able, through personal domains or the use of automated systems, to build personal websites for more than a decade. Teachers today have access to numerous course delivery tools of all sorts. But, perhaps an institutional web page or even a personal web page dedicated to meeting professional responsibilities would be more exclusive and more easily maintained with a professional decorum. Perhaps one's own web site would not be built and designed for and would not function on the basis of sharing casual commentary as a means of socializing. SNS, on the other hand, are in fact built for that express purpose.

Shiveley and VanFossen (2005) question both the method and impact of using the Internet in classroom teaching. Their study indicates that, while there is little research on learning with the Internet and there is not yet any systemic or regular use of the Internet, teachers have not changed their teaching styles in order to accommodate online technology.

Perhaps the view that any new power carries a unique and definite responsibility to avoid the dangers of *Pandora's Box* has merit. Siegle (2010) calls for such responsibility in understanding the risks of technology and suggests caution regarding abuse, bullying and other dangers.

There has been an extremely rapid growth of social networking and educators must consider the issues not only for their students and the challenge of their craft (Barrett, 2006) but also for their own security (Bratt, 2010). Ethical conduct is always a component of professional behavior but the increased visibility of an online presence can bring increased scrutiny and criticism, especially in the overly-sensitized, politically correct society of today. Social networking is increasing as there are ever more sites and online tools to facilitate that interaction.

And, the phenomenon is worldwide and growing. SNS are used to interact with friends and just spend casual time together. This interaction has even grown to the extent of interfering with the private lives of over half the users (Herguner, 2011). The perception that negative experiences outweigh the positive is predominant yet does not seem to deter its use in spite of the general conclusion that SNS are not safe.

SNS-using students are particularly at risk sometimes due to their own behavior as much as the inherent traits of the medium itself. Young people lack the maturity and perhaps lack the political or strategic savvy to be safe and effective users (DeFranco, 2011). The medium itself forces a kind of independence and self-reliance on users and parents and other guardians cannot easily monitor their children's online lifestyles. Educators may be closer to that experience than parents but they too have their own risks and safety as a concern. DeFranco suggests, however, that educators are perhaps the best choice to step in to teach responsible behavior and Internet safety.

While there is a sense of risk and danger as described above and the use and adoption by educators and students seems inevitable, perhaps there is a sense of potential in SNS. One may speculate as to the many varied forces driving adoption and integration of SNS in our society, but the lack of preparation and coping by teachers seems obvious. There are many cases of sanctions against teachers, warranted or not, and acceptable teacher conduct and entitlements to privacy are not at all clear in online environments. (Foulger, Ewbank, Kay, Popp, & Carter, 2009).

Some see potential for educational applications of SNS (Reid, 2011). An expansion of literacy and communication to online environments creates changes in the normal dynamics of identities and relationships. With SNS and other forms of Internet presence becoming so commonplace among students and educators, further investigation into use and perception is warranted.

## **Methodology**

The researchers conducted an anonymous survey of South Carolina public school teachers to ascertain their perspectives and status regarding their Internet presence. Included

in the population were elementary, middle and high school teachers from both rural and urban areas around the state. Subjects were a mix from across the curriculum and years of experience.

Research interests were focused on the attitudes and concerns of participants about having and maintaining an Internet presence both personally and professionally. A particular focus was on the use of SNS by educators. Considering the security risks of Internet exposure and the volatile nature of reputation and professional standing for educators as SNS users, research looked at the perspectives of teachers about that.

The research questions were:

- (a) to what extent do teachers have and use an Internet presence?
- (b) what is the nature of that Internet presence for professional responsibilities?
- (c) what are their fears and concerns about an Internet presence.
- (d) what are the fears and concerns for the professional and personal use of SNS?

Survey questions were much broader and asked about personal and professional uses of both web sites and SNS. Subjects were also asked about their concerns and recommendations for fellow educators. Choices were arranged on a *Likert* scale of 4 levels with no middle or neutral option.

*Personal use* was defined as use of the Internet (web sites and SNS) when off-duty, at home and not for supporting professional responsibilities. *Professional use* was defined as usage that contributes to or is directed in support of professional responsibilities. This would include but not be limited to classroom use, interaction with colleagues, students or outside of class support for teaching responsibilities. Web sites were distinguished from SNS in the sense that SNS are both template structured and integrated into a shared environment with other users. Of course an institutional web site is also based in a shared environment (compared to a personal web site) but one dedicated strictly to the professional interests of the institution and the profession.

Out of 32 total questions, below are 4 sample questions drawn from the survey and provided here to illustrate the nature and range of inquiry...

1. Regarding your own professional use of technology (*not personal*) in the classroom or in support of teaching responsibilities you have and use a website that you operate and maintain on your own... [not at all] -- [yes, frequently].
2. Regarding your own personal use of technology (*not professionally*) at home or when off-duty in your personal life, you use a Facebook account... [not at all] -- [yes, frequently].
3. I am concerned about revealing personal information through a social sharing site... [not at all] -- [yes, very much].
4. I recommend that teachers utilize social sharing sites in support of professional responsibilities... [not at all] -- [yes, very much].

Results were examined first to identify respondents' Internet presence and also for their fears and concerns. Secondly, results were examined to consider consistencies and conflicts or contradictions in respondents' Internet presence practices.

## Results

A respectable return rate yielded n=125 respondents. Results on each question were averaged for the group and are distinguished across three categories: (a) Internet use for personal purposes; (b) Internet use for professional purposes; and (c) fears, concerns and recommendations.

### ***Personal Purposes***

Respondents were high on the use of Facebook which far exceeded MySpace and all other SNS. As one might expect, email with colleagues far over-shadows usage with students in the personal category. Interestingly however, personal web sites falls far below institutional web sites in the personal category. That is, teachers apparently do not tent to operate web sites for their own personal purposes compared with their presence on an institutionally provided site with a difference of 1.1. Figure 1 shows the distribution of uses for personal purposes.

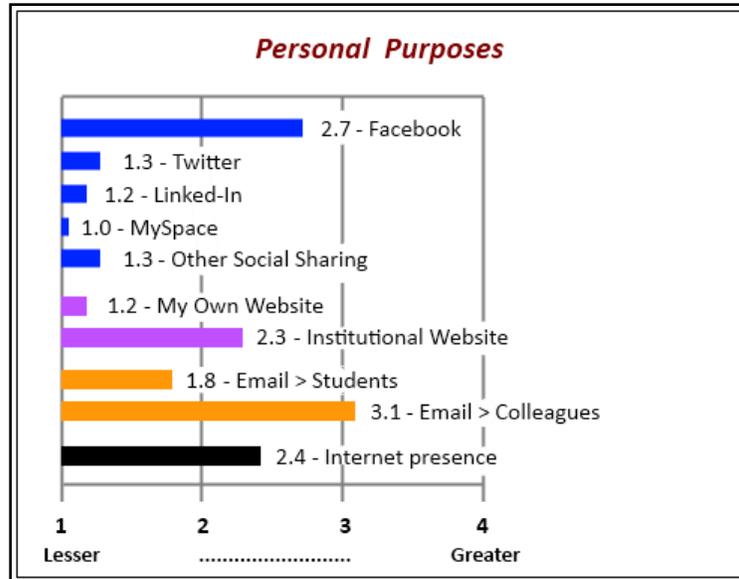


Figure 1: Average levels of use for personal purposes.

Teacher’s overall claim of personal Internet presence is virtually split in the middle on average. Interestingly, this is almost identical to the presence of institutionally provided web sites. Email and Facebook were clearly the strongest or highest uses.

**Professional Purposes**

Figure 2 shows the distribution of uses for professional purposes. Note the extreme jump in Email usage which seems predominant at nearly the highest possible rating.

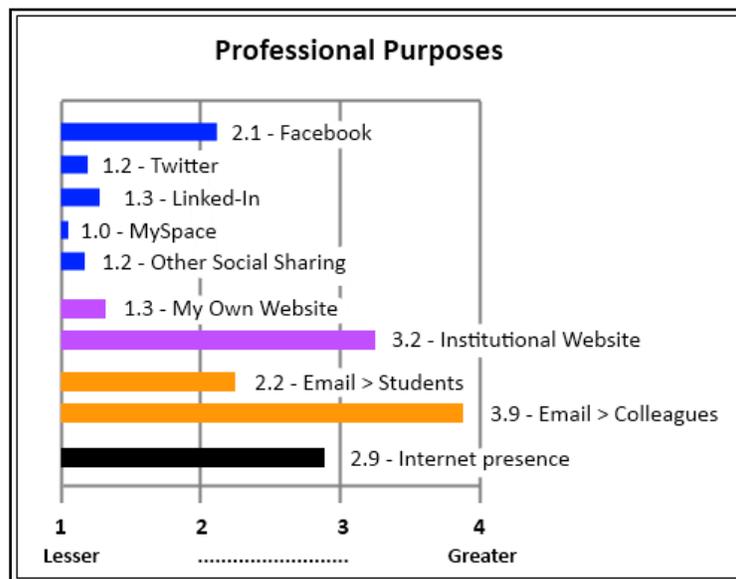


Figure 2: Average levels of use for professional purposes.

Respondents were again high on the use of Facebook which far exceeded all other SNS options. It was less than the use of Facebook for personal purposes. The difference between personally maintained web sites versus those provided by the institution was much greater with a difference of 1.9. Teacher's overall claim of a professional Internet presence is higher than for personal use and above a middle average. Interestingly, the overall claim of an internet presence is considerably below the claim of using both an institutionally provided web site and email with colleagues which remain high.

**Fears, Concerns and Recommendations**

Respondents did not claim to be particularly challenged in using either SNS (level 2.0) or web sites (2.1). And, they did not seem to be very concerned about distributing learning materials through either SNS (1.4) or web sites (2.3).

While a recognition of risks and dangers for a web site presence is moderate (2.4), this was considerably less than risks and dangers perceived for SNS. Fears included specific concerns (figure 3) about using SNS for sharing information (3.3), being viewed with a lack of decorum and impropriety (3.0), and other damage to their professional reputation (3.3).

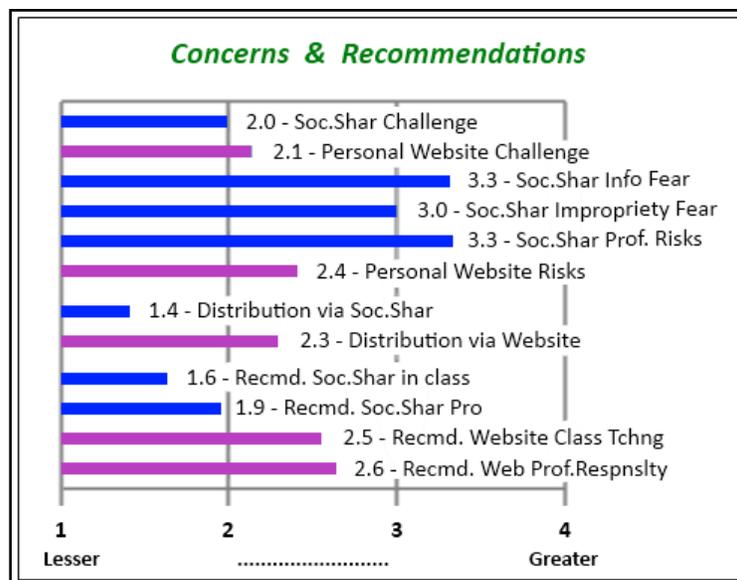


Figure 3: Averages of concerns and recommendations.

Respondents' recommendations reflect those fears and concerns as SNS was the least positive for in-class use (1.6) and for other professional purposes (1.9). Web sites were viewed and recommended more positively than SNS both for classroom teaching (2.5) and general professional responsibilities (2.6).

## Discussion

Clearly there are perceived dangers and risks among educators for various forms of Internet use (Consortium for School Networking, 2011). Results in this study also document such concerns but also indicate that teachers desire a stronger, more predominant presence on the Internet. They are concerned about both the challenge of use and specifically dangers associated with SNS.

It is interesting that there is a relatively strong use of institutional web sites while there is hardly any presence in personally-controlled web sites. This can also be contrasted with the strong use of *Facebook*, a popular SNS, in spite of the fact that personally controlled web sites can be comparatively safe as the peer pressure to act inappropriately is typically absent. It should be noted that institutional web sites are usually developed and managed by a central technology expert and SNS provides a user-friendly template environment for easy site development and maintenance. These choices require very little if any technical knowledge whereas personally developed and maintained web sites may be perceived as a tougher challenge or require a programming ability (Galloway, 2008). Teachers may be reluctant to take personal control of their technological presence instead taking the more passive approach of using managed and guided tools.

It is interesting to note that, in spite of teachers' considerable sense of danger and risk associated with SNS, in particular for educators, there is a strong use of *Facebook*. Teachers seem to be subject to today's popular trends of growing SNS usage even while not recommending such usage to other educators. They operate *Facebook* and other SNS even while concerned for their own safety and professional standing as a result.

Perhaps SNS provide a personalization not readily available on institutionally controlled web sites. Given the relatively low usage of personally maintained web sites – a viable and

powerful alternative for delivering a personalized presence on the Internet – perhaps SNS is the alternative of choice. Perhaps teachers, like so many others in our society, seek a venue for sharing and socializing, a popular pastime for today's youth.

Collaborative environments have been identified as having an immediate impact on K-12 education (Johnson, Smith, Levine, & Haywood, 2010). The immediate future includes an even greater expansion of today's extended computing environments to a full internet-based form of computing that's sure to bring even greater challenges.

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