Social media’s ethical dilemma

Should social networking sites be used in the classroom?
By Michael Henderson and Glenn Auld

Social networking sites such as Facebook are increasingly being used in classroom contexts (physical and virtual). However, the uptake has been comparatively slow since, unlike many other technologies such as word processors, social networking sites do not easily slot into familiar curriculum delivery models and assessment.

Moreover, there has been considerable caution because social networking sites blur the boundaries between professional/school and personal lives, as well as having been the subject of considerable media focus in terms of cyberbullying and predatory behaviour.

We see the exploration of social networking sites as educational tools to be positive. There is a small but growing body of research that indicates communication and coordination in relation to learning activities can be enhanced. Students and teachers can collaborate over tasks, and provide support to each other, both emotional and cognitive.

Many teachers are turning to social networking sites because it also offers a less cumbersome means of connecting with students than institutionalised virtual learning environments. Another justification, often heard in our research, is that students already enjoy, and are heavy users of, social networking sites for leisure.

This article suggests that there are a variety of ethical concerns we need to consider to go beyond the issue of cybersafety. It is important for us to be clear that this is not presented with a view to scare people from talking about these issues – rather, we are hoping to construct a space where teachers are empowered to engage with the dialogue and implications around the ethical dilemmas they encounter in their changing professional practice.

Much of this work rests on the understanding that both students and teachers have lifeworlds outside of school intimately connected with identities, complex social practices and discourse that influence how they engage or disengage with each other and with texts such as Facebook.

We understand ethics to be a moral choice, which means that teachers have to ultimately decide on their own response to the dilemmas, according to their socio-cultural and professional contexts. Professional codes of conduct and departmental guidelines are useful, but ultimately do not provide us with a means of understanding the foundation or consequence of our ethical practice.

The following discussions are intended to help equip readers to make their choice, but also to reveal lines of inquiry that need to be pursued further to eventually strengthen their confidence in such choices.

Should we appropriate students’ social networking identities?
Many researchers and teachers argue that using student home practices in the classroom is the cornerstone of successful pedagogy. Engaging with social networks is more than knowing what buttons to press, but also understanding why and how you interact in that space, which may vary significantly between students, let alone between teacher and students.

SNS represent freedoms in expression, self-regulation and choice in terms of affinity. These may be different from a teacher’s understanding of appropriate expression, locus of control, and equitable and harmonious community spaces.

Consequently, we might be colonising a classroom with ill-matched, poorly-understood use of SNS with unintended consequences, and an invasion of their out-of-school technological practices and identity.

When students are encouraged to use their Facebook account to interact with the teacher, or with fellow students, they are being asked to behave, converse, share and self-regulate in ways that are different to their already established practices and even harmful to their social network identity.

Teachers need to be sure they have evidence that students want their virtual identities and networks made public in a classroom context before they embark on such sharing. It should not be assumed that all students in a classroom are already in an online social network with each other.

The inclusion of SNS in the classroom, especially ones that students are already members of, risks exposing elements of their out-of-school identities, values, actions and beliefs as well as potentially exposing their extended network of friends to teachers and fellow students who may not otherwise have been ‘friended’.

A review of the literature reveals that despite students familiarity with SNS, they are not experienced in, or necessarily enthusiastic about, using SNS for collaborative curriculum-based activity.

Consequently, we argue that students have the right to self-select texts that
expose their out-of-school practices to their peers in the classroom.

Should we engage students in public performance of curriculum?
There is an ethical responsibility when teachers ask students to tweet, blog, post, share or co-construct their texts with the rest of the class. Whose responsibility is it to educate risk management (e.g. identity management) in public forums?

In an increasingly digitally recorded, networked and searchable world, how can we promise students that their digital footprint (online conversations, interactions, personal details) will be confined to the classroom context, including the specific people in the class and the limited time-frame of the class/subject?

What was once thought private such as emails, or non-searchable, such as pre-digital texts, have been proven to be at risk of being made public at a later date. A pre-social media example is the 2003 public release of Enron’s email database of over one million emails by 176 named former employees which highlights the transience of what is considered private.

A more recent social media example can be found when Google implemented a social media application called Buzz (a precursor to Google+) that put Gmail users frequently contacted people into a personalised network.

Google wanted to offer users a hybrid experience of social networking and microblogging. However they had not realised that their users may not want their contacts to actually be able to see each other. As Rainie and Wellman (2012) note: “all hell broke loose. People in discreet multiple love relationships were outed; psychiatric care relationships became visible”.

Despite Google changing Buzz to make it optional for users, the damage had already been done. Many users were adversely affected and Google had to pay $8.5 million to settle a class action lawsuit as well as agree to independent privacy audits for the following 20 years.

The point here is that online data thought to be private or reasonably limited in accessibility can very easily become public. Teachers do need to be aware of the risk that content, personal details and entire networks may become public.

How do we recognise and respond to illicit SNS activity?
Teaching with SNS in classroom contexts offers the opportunities of bringing outside and arguably authentic and meaningful texts, discourses and practices into the classroom as well as increasing possibilities of interacting in new ways with wider networks beyond the typical context of the classroom. However, this also brings with it risks. There are risks such as those previously described, but also there are risks (or opportunities) to engage in, observe, or become informed about behaviour that is illegal, amoral, immoral, or otherwise illicit. This ethical dilemma is particularly complex because it is not always easy to identify the actors (perpetrators, victims, regulatory or reporting bodies) or even the illicit nature of the activity itself. An example is the use of a picture of a movie star or a cartoon character as a social media avatar. Is this behaviour illicit? They could risk identity theft and breach of copyright; however, the likelihood of being sued may not be very high and furthermore it is possible that teachers would dismiss these concerns even if they did recognise them as illicit, potentially even treating the process as a positive expression of identity.

Another example is the fanfiction in which participants discuss and create new stories for their favourite series, such as Harry Potter. Such activities are encouraged by educators in the field of literacy.

However, there have been successful cases by some publishers in claiming fanfiction and similarly infringe on their copyright. What appears to be an innovative pedagogy could be inherently illegal. Creating fanfiction or derivatives has been a classroom strategy for decades if not longer. The issue here is publishing the material online, and consequently the extent of the readership, as well as the usage of the material in a derivative or satirical form (the latter being more defensible).

Are we prepared for our social network identities to go public?
Social networking applications also expose teachers’ out-of-school identities, and their networks to a greater degree of scrutiny by their students, colleagues and school communities. An obvious answer to this problem is for teachers to choose to only engage with social networking applications that offer a degree of privacy and control. However, this is not always feasible, nor is it necessarily desirable, reducing the authentic context to a staged pretext. Teachers need to consider what the implications are for co-inhabiting spaces that are designed to connect people and share information.

The two most obvious ethical concerns of SNS co-habitation are (a) teachers sharing their private (out-of-school) identities and practices with their students that might not be congruent with the expectations placed on them as professionals, and, (b) students actively seeking contact with teachers on the networks and in doing so build a profile of the teachers that may be incongruent with expectations, or even place the teacher in a compromising position.

Teachers need to consider how they will negotiate students who stalk them online as part the dilemma of inhabiting the same network.

In our research, we found that it was not unusual for students to actively search for information about their teachers, including their profiles in online social spaces.

These ethical concerns are valid both in and out of SNS, however, the unique characteristics of social media such as anonymity of the browser, persistence of data including histories of social interactions, and simplicity of searching across networks have increased the potential risk for teachers.

Conclusion
Where teachers foster a dialogue amongst students and between teacher and student, they will have a strong foundation in their planning for social networking services in their classrooms. Indeed, Merchant (2011) suggests effective use of SNS in a classroom context will involve learning from, about and with SNS so teachers have a better understanding of the practices associated with these texts.

However, to learn from, with and about SNS both teachers and students need access to them. While one approach to SNS in the classroom would be to provide access to SNS that is restricted to the classroom or does not offer public consumption or wider networks, this response found throughout educational policy of building walled gardens that have the shape but none of the authenticity, purpose, thrill, or complexity of the SNS that the students have chosen to inhabit outside of school.

Within these walled gardens students cannot engage in the ethical dilemmas and social practices associated with SNS that will be a part of the full participation of their future public and private lives.

We argue that social networking services should be explored as an educational space, however, we need to do this mindful of not only cybersafety issues as well as professional conduct guidelines, but also ethical concerns centring on the respect of both student and teacher lifeworlds that extend beyond the classroom context.

Dr Michael Henderson is senior lecturer in educational technologies, Faculty of Education, Monash University.

Dr Glenn Auld is senior lecturer in language and literacy, at the School of Education, Deakin University.