Fifth Period Is Facebook
Why schools should stop blocking social network sites.
By Nicholas Bramble
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At a suburban school district near Washington, D.C., the most popular teacher happens to be a local star on YouTube. Unbeknown to him, students with cell-phone cameras have videotaped him dancing to "Soulja Boy Tell 'Em" and other songs taught to him by the students.

Less sweetly, when another teacher from the same school Googled the school's name, she found videos showing students getting into fights with one another. They posted the videos to their MySpace pages and debated who had the better fighting skills. The teacher also found footage from a set of girls who had filmed themselves dancing suggestively in school stairwells. These videos were disturbing, inappropriate, and often exceptionally well-produced, with multiple camera angles and sophisticated editing cuts.

If the school administration knew of the videos, they would be deleted and the teenagers responsible for them would likely face suspension—including the ones who taught their teacher how to dance to Soulja Boy. Schools have had a nearly unanimous response to Facebook, MySpace, and YouTube: repression and silence. Administrators block access to these sites because they think it's important to keep classrooms free from the perceived harms associated with social networks—harassment, bullying, exploitative advertising, violence, and sexual imagery.

But this is shortsighted. Educators should stop thinking about how to repress the huge amounts of intellectual and social energy kids devote to social media and start thinking about how to channel that energy away from causing trouble and toward getting more out of their classes. After all, it's not as if most kids are investing commensurate energy into, say, their math homework. Why not try to
start bridging the worlds of Facebook, YouTube, and the classroom?

The main reason is fear. Megan Meier, the 13-year-old student in Missouri who committed suicide after an ex-friend's mother created a fake MySpace profile to humiliate her, stands as a warning against school involvement with the intricacies of kids' online social lives. In response to cyber-stalking and online solicitation of minors, the House of Representatives passed a bill in 2006—the Deleting Online Predators Act—that would require schools to block students from accessing sites like Facebook, MySpace, and LiveJournal. The Senate has put forward similar proposals. And even without a Congressional mandate, many schools have already taken the initiative to ban students—and teachers—from using these sites.

Bad idea. Researchers have already enumerated the benefits that kids can get from traditional media. Watching Sesame Street or Blue's Clues improves children's problem-solving skills and school readiness. Teaching students how to use word-processing software, Web-design programs, and video-production tools is a proven way of refocusing at-risk teens on school, and, eventually, getting them jobs. Social networks can also pull in students who are otherwise disengaged, because they draw on kids' often intense interest in finding new ways to communicate with one another.

How can teachers bring social networking into the classroom? For starters, students could talk about what they're doing on Facebook and company, map out the ways they're making connections with one another, and share videos and software they've created. Once the conversation gets going, teachers could figure out whether some kids were being left out and find ways to increase those students' media literacy and bring them into the fold. Teachers can manage the project by selecting the best content and conversations, and incorporating it into other parts of the curriculum. If a student created an entry on Wikipedia for a local band or sports team, other students could work on revising the entry and building it into a larger local history project. The audience for school projects need no longer be one hurried teacher.
Schools could also find students like the ones who made the stairwell dance videos and get them to produce a school-sanctioned video with a better subject—the re-enactment of a literary or historical scene, for example. This isn't as simple as a teacher saying, "Why don't you write a poem about your frustration, rap it on video, and put it on YouTube?" Instead, a teacher could assign students the task of filming a scene from The Scarlet Letter in the stairwell, identifying the dynamic of shaming in the novel, and writing about how it might be playing out in their Facebook news feeds. In math class, students could develop statistical models and graphs of the patterns of information flow in their social networks. To understand how advertising works, students from different backgrounds and with different online habits could compare what's being hawked to them. And for a school journalism project, teams of students could aggregate other students' narratives from blogs, Facebook, and Twitter and compile a real-time collective analysis of the state of their educational union.

In the process, teachers could also gain technical skills and be in a better position to head off future online trouble. Consider this recent MySpace post from Washington, D.C.: "I swear man when I see Martin and Kris on the bus they going to get it, Trina u a snitch, me and Bobby going to beat the shit out of them" (names changed). A school psychologist who knew about it could talk to the kids involved in hopes of preventing a real-world fight.

Schools also stand to gain from harnessing students' budding tech expertise. Rather than relying on private companies like Blackboard for expensive software, schools can get students who are taking computer programming to develop social media tools, apps, and platforms for creating and sharing class projects. These projects could then go on a school's Web site, in an iTunes-style store. Moodle, Ck12.org, and Sakai are great examples of how schools are using this new kind of open, cost-effective learning.

Some teachers and administrators might object that such proposals inadvertently reward students for online misbehavior. But there are ways to discipline students other than through the typical punishment
of suspension. Editing videos is slow and painstaking; a student could be made to stay after school or miss a free period to work on it.

Another objection is that proposals like these break down the distinction between the schoolyard and the classroom, and could allow mean and anonymous student gossip to further invade children's lives. To be sure, the classroom does serve as a sanctuary, sometimes, from petty concerns and conflicts. But slamming the classroom door on social media just makes the virtual world more of a waste land. A hundred years ago, John Dewey warned that when teachers suppress children's natural interests in the classroom, they "substitute the adult for the child, and so weaken intellectual curiosity and alertness, suppress initiative, and deaden interest." By locking social networking out of school, teachers and principals are making exactly that error. Instead, they should meet kids where they live: online.

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