

## Day 3: Friday 13<sup>th</sup> January, 2011

### Empowering students to harness the power of social networking for learning

by Tony Parkin

Social media have had a huge impact on the life-styles of many of our learners, including a large number of those who in theory are too young to officially use the majority of them. Many of the media stories focus on the potential risks and threats that social media could pose to the young, particularly to those whose abilities or approaches may make them more vulnerable. But there are many positive opportunities and stories to show that social media, used appropriately, can do a huge amount that is of value to these learners, whether it is furnishing more opportunities for them to engage, and have their voices heard, or helping bridge the home-school divide and bring about increased parental engagement.

The first 'expert speaker' at the session was MirandaNet's own Leon Cych, who stepped out from behind the camera at the workshop to discuss his own experiences of introducing social media into schools. Leon opened by stressing that the key to social media were the people, not the technologies. This was demonstrated by the response to his initial message about the workshop, which he had circulated to his 'personal learning network', the people with whom he was in touch on social media such as Twitter and Facebook. His message had asked for guidance to the whereabouts and availability of resources addressing the session's topic. Whilst many tweets back pointed to learning resources on the web, such as the TES resource bank, many also pointed him towards people who were seen to have expertise in the field, such as @bebevans22, who manages the TES SEN resources. So it is frequently not about 'knowing the answer', but about 'knowing someone who does' that lies at the heart of social networking for professional support. Being pointed towards forums where the professionals who are experts at the topic you are considering is particularly valuable, as you can then tap into their expertise and make sure that you get hold of the best possible resources that are available, which they will direct you towards.

So we could see that the technology only augments the standard techniques that educators have always followed, by seeking out the best practitioners in their field for guidance and professional advice. For example, @bebevans had established herself as a wonderfully supportive teacher on Twitter, and had now been recruited to curate SEN resources on the TES to help disseminate her expertise more widely.

Though much of this social media support is delivered via channels such as Twitter and Facebook, many of the practitioners also seek opportunities to get together face to face, to reinforce their personal learning networks. Relationships begin online, but are strengthened at face to face events such as Teachmeets and Collaborate4Change. This support can also be enhanced by clustering online social media interactions via wikis and bloglists, which are proving particularly effective with groups in initial teacher training.

A remark from the floor pointed out this also could have great potential for the parents of children with SEND. Frequently these parents felt a little isolated, and lacked the confidence that came for knowing and sharing with other parents in a similar position to their own. The work of the numerous support groups could clearly be strengthened and facilitated by the use of social media to grow their own personal learning networks. It could also be a way to bring teachers and parents together in developing the child's learning.

To illustrate the power of this idea, Leon showed the group David Mitchell's Quadblogging project ([www.quadblogging.net](http://www.quadblogging.net)). This brought together the blogging activity of children from four schools, enabling them to work collaboratively and also provide an authentic audience for the children's writing. Much of the work took place away from the screen, and the children could develop their writing in traditional ways, but now with a purpose. However the social approach also brought together the teachers and parents from the four schools, greatly adding value and extending the community engaged in the activity as social media should aim to do.

Another input from the floor pointed out the particular value of the social blogging approach for parents when it came to school visits and trips. The parents of SEND students in particular can be concerned for the well-being of their children on school trips, and may even be reluctant to allow them to participate because of anxiety around the unknown aspects of the trip. Using social media and blogging tools allows the parents to be in close contact with children throughout the trip, and many have reported the very positive motivating effect of parents being able to see photos, videos and text from pupils whilst the trip is actually taking place.

This dimension of social media was particularly useful when it comes to working with parents who themselves have not enjoyed their own school experience, especially those who have then not travelled far from their own local area. These parents may themselves be fearful of re-engaging with the world of education, and of the wider world into which their own children are being introduced. Social media can be a very useful aid in breaking down this cycle by providing channels which they can explore from their own home, when they wish, and at their own pace.

The example of the work of Dan Roberts, at Saltash.Net, showed that a carefully-managed social media project could engage both hard-to-reach parents and children with SEND. The piggery project, with a webcam following the development of the school's own pigs, and a presence on Facebook, had sent the community engagement with the school web-pages sky-high. But the project had been sensitively introduced and carefully managed over a period of two years to ensure that there was complete trust by these parents and pupils of the school's use of social media. The essential need for such trust, and the importance of leadership in this area, had also been a feature of Christine Terry's input at the earlier AfA workshop, and underlined why Sonia Blandford's mention of partnership with the National College and the leadership dimension was now so critical within the AfA programme.

This all took hard work, and a need for collaboration between all parties, but once it was in place it offered huge growth opportunities. When the inevitable challenges do crop up, the time engaged in bringing about the collaboration yields dividends, as Christine had made clear, and rather than a need to ban and close down the participants are well placed to work together on resolving the issue and moving forward in a collaborative way.

Leon pointed out that the social media also allowed schools to tap into existing expertise on how to bring about these shifts in approach and opinion on their value in schools. There are schools out there with the experience of success, and who are happy to share how they achieved it, to help reduce the effort of schools following on. Another key can be the use of students' own expertise to reduce the workload, and this could also offer opportunities for SEND students to demonstrate their own leadership potential, and enhance their confidence in the community. One anecdote told of a vulnerable student who suddenly revealed his ability to write HTML, and who was able to lead and engage his peers in a way that had hitherto not been expected. A small but crucial step for him and his parents and teacher, who all gained from the discovery and experience. Social media can make all students' expertise and capabilities transparent to all at the school

and allow them to release this potential. And importantly provide rapid channels to share their successes with their parents and peers, so crucial for their self-confidence and feeling of self worth.

The next speaker was Dr Sangeet Bhullar, Executive Director of WISE KIDS (<http://www.wisekids.org.uk>), a not-for-profit organisation that provides training programmes and consultancy in New Media, Internet and Mobile Technologies, Internet Proficiency, Literacy and Safety. She also was concerned at the prevalence of discussions where the combination of young people and the internet seemed to acquaint with fear, and anxious at how out of touch many adults were with the reality of children's online activities. The theoretical 13 year age limit was no real barrier, at least 10 million children under that age are known to be on Facebook, for example, so it is important to work with primary children too. Also all the warnings about not engaging with people online do not sit easily with their own experiences of playing online on their Xbox or PS3, essentially with strangers She felt that it was crucial to engage and listen to these young people in helping shape their use of social media. We need to instil them confidence and resilience, so that if or when things go wrong they are able to deal with the issue, and talk about the experience confidently and maturely.

One example was the way that their peers can turn out to be false friends, offering to help them in an online game, and get them extra points, when actually they are aiming to take over their IDs and steal their online points or valuables. This can be an important lesson about the need for guarding one's privacy and online IDs carefully. These issues can be more challenging when these are young students, or particularly vulnerable, such as those with autism.

One effective strategy can be to use more closed networks but with similar social media features to enable younger and more vulnerable children to learn the skills and confidence required. But in all cases it is crucial that those working with these children are themselves fluent in social media, can understand the dangers and pitfalls, have learned effective strategies and are therefore able to talk confidently and knowledgeably with the children. Rather than offering just a list of 'don'ts' they should sit with these youngsters, find out what they do and how they behave online, then use strategies that reflect the children's actual practice. We need to recognise too that children are far more influenced by their peers than by adults in this field, so need to seed best practice amongst the young to help them advise their peers. Stephen Carrick Davies is working on an excellent project "Munch, Poke and Ping" (<http://www.carrick-davies.com/mpp>) working with excluded children that focussed on their behaviours and experiences. The resulting report (<http://www.carrick-davies.com/mpp/mpp-report>) is a must read for all working in this area of education.

The use of the Xbox and PS3 networks can often be largely ignored by education, yet children are using these heavily to engage with others both in this country and across the world, just as the more familiar PC online games and environments allow. A really useful strategy is to identify which students have expertise in these areas, and then use them as mentors for the younger and more vulnerable children to help them engage safely. Many children who have difficulty making friends in the real world find they can do it more easily online. This can be an extremely positive experience for them, boosting their confidence, but may also be making them perhaps more vulnerable to scams and abuse. There is evidence that some older teenagers have been using their expertise to help them groom younger pupils, particularly vulnerable girls, rather than supporting them.

Sangeet suggested that schools could see themselves as learning providers, bringing in parents and pupils working with the teachers in this area, sharing expertise and ideas. Leon observed that as this is an emergent area there is no existing body of knowledge,

and it is an ideal area for genuine community learning together, building bonds of confidence and trust between all parties, and turning what can currently be seen as threat to an opportunity.

At this point there was a group discussion and wide consensus of the need for more of the openness and positive stories that Sangheev had highlighted. Cliff Manning, of Radiowaves, cheered everyone up with an account of a Goth pupil, perceived as rather detached from his class and somewhat challenging, being able to blossom when the school obtained some new music software, and he was able to demonstrate his expertise and became seen as something of a guru. This again shifted everyone's perception of him, and his music expertise was now recognised, whereas previously Goth music had not been a part of school music, and so he was unappreciated. He also went on to develop other related skills, and became a mentor on the NUMU website. This pattern has been reported elsewhere with children on the autistic spectrum, and was a positive aspect of technology and social media that deserved much wider publicity. Christina Preston observed that there were so many anecdotes of pupils who did not thrive in conventional learning environments finding opportunities in this way that perhaps there should be far more research into the advantages and affordances that were available, that may contribute more of the good news stories required to counter the negative media articles. Yet another example emerged about a social group of young carers, who were linked and sharing experiences, in a way that enabled them to be individuals first, not just 'carers', and helped them learn and share their particular challenges and solutions in a way that was hugely beneficial.

Garath Jackson brought the session to a close, observing that the most heartening thing had been that despite the concern around the negative coverage of social media, the session itself had highlighted the large number of positive experiences and stories that could help ensure that these media would be used constructively to benefit all children, including the young and vulnerable.