

Online Communication is Healthy, Normal, and Critical to Identity Development

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Abstract

Although some student affairs professionals and other university administrators have concerns about the negative effects and dangers of online communication tools such as Facebook and MySpace, use of these tools and exploration of these environments is healthy, normal, and critical to identity development. Most research contradicts notions that online communication erodes or prevents the creation of communities and social ties or that online communication is unsuitable for the formation or maintenance of communities. Further, use of these tools and environments has strong ties with student development theories regarding identity development.

Some student affairs professionals fear that college students' use of Internet communication technology is replacing traditional methods of communications, unsuitable for forming or maintaining communities, and often frivolous or unnecessary. These concerns were raised in this publication in December by Shotick and Stephens (2005) in an article summarizing the results of a technology roundtable at a regional NASPA conference and Chapman (2005) in an article discussing the potential uses of Facebook in "prevention and student affairs efforts" (¶10). These concerns, while not unfounded, are certainly not being realized for most people who use Internet communication technologies. Current and previous research shows that the Internet not only fails to displace personal communication but coexists with and complements traditional forms of communication. Moreover, students communicating via recent Internet technologies such as [MySpace](#) and [Facebook](#) are engaging in healthy and natural socialization and identity development.

Internet Communication Transforms - Not Destroys - Communities

One of the basic fears of student affairs professionals with respect to technology is its perceived power to prevent the creation of or even destroy communities. A common example (used by Shotick and Stephens (2005)) is that of roommates who prefer using Instant Messaging to communicate with one another rather than hold a face-to-face conversation. This fear seems to be based on two possible hypotheses: (a) Electronic communication displaces traditional communication (the *displacement hypothesis*) and (b) electronic communication is unsuitable for building or maintaining healthy relationships and communities (the *unsuitability hypothesis*).

Research has consistently found the displacement hypothesis false for most people. Although early research found that the Internet, a tool intended for communication, appeared to paradoxically increase loneliness and reduce communication between Internet users and their

neighbors and local community members (Kraut et al., 1998), further research found that "negative effects dissipated" (Kraut et al., 2002, p. 49) over a period of 1-2 years. The primary explanations for this are that: (a) The Internet users participating in the longitudinal study gained more experience and comfort with the technology and (b) the technology itself matured and became easier to use (Kraut et al., 2002). If these assumptions hold true for today's students and the technologies they use, this may explain why they experience fewer negative effects than previous Internet users.

Among the most extensive and recently published research confirming the aforementioned disproval of the displacement hypothesis is continuing longitudinal research conducted by the [Pew Internet & American Life Project](#). Not only has their research confirmed that Internet communication does not displace traditional communication, they have discovered many ways in which the two forms of communication complement one another (Boase, Horrigan, Wellman, and Rainie, 2006). Internet use has "become integrated with the rhythms of daily life" (Wellman, Boase, and Chen, 2002). Researchers at The Pew Internet & American Life Project note that:

The traditional human orientation to neighborhood- and village-based groups is moving towards communities that are oriented around geographically dispersed social networks. People communicate and maneuver in these networks rather than being bound up in one solidary [*sic*] community. Yet people's networks continue to have substantial numbers of relatives and neighbors — the traditional bases of community — as well as friends and workmates.

The internet and email play an important role in maintaining these dispersed social networks. Rather than conflicting with people's community ties, we find that *the internet fits seamlessly with in-person and phone encounters* [italics added]. With the help of the internet, people are able to maintain active contact with sizable social networks, even though many of the people in those networks do not live nearby. (Boase et al., 2006, p. i)

The unsuitability hypothesis has also been found false. Just as with traditional communities and neighborhoods, "the Internet has allowed individuals and groups to find common interests, engage in various types of exchange and create bonds of concern, support and affection that can unite them—for both good and ill" (Katz and Rice, 2002). Members of virtual communities share many or most traits in common with traditional communities necessary for there to be a sense of community, such as feelings of membership and influence and shared emotional connections (Blanchard and Markus, 2004). In large and increasing numbers, people cope with or help others cope with major illnesses, make major investment decisions, and make career and education decisions using the Internet. For many people, the Internet is the most important source of information for those tasks (Horrigan and Rainie, 2006). Internet technology not only allows people to maintain communications with social contacts near and far, it also allows people to maintain larger social networks (Boase et al., 2006).

Student affairs and Information Technology professionals would do well to keep these research findings in mind, particularly when making policies regarding electronic communications technologies such as Instant Messaging or Voice Over IP. Students do not (always) use these technologies frivolously; they use them to build and maintain key social contacts and networks. Particular attention should be paid to foreign and exchange students who

may rely on these technologies as their primary means of keeping in contact with their geographically dispersed social networks.

Exploration and Use of Internet Technologies is Natural and Normal - Not Harmful

The popular social-networking websites Facebook and MySpace have raised many concerns among university officials. In addition to formal presentations and informal discussions held at conferences and online, universities have taken public action. For example, Del Mar College, a community college in Texas, recently blocked on-campus access to MySpace for "eating up too much bandwidth" (Associated Press, 2006). Administrators and law enforcement officials at Kansas State University (Kennedy, 2005), The Pennsylvania State University (Lash, 2005), Syracuse University (Pepitone, 2006), and [several other universities](#) have used Facebook to investigate and discipline students. Student affairs professionals have started creating local policies and advising other professionals based on their pioneering experiences (Chapman, 2005; Gregory, 2006).

There is no doubt that popular, public services like those provided by Facebook and MySpace pose many unique dangers. Chapman is quite right that "students often create 'alter egos' on line that fulfill some social function" (2005, ¶14) but it is often overlooked that social experimentation in these "digital publics" (boyd, 2006, ¶32) is important for identity development. [boyd](#) (2006), an expert on digital publics and adolescent identity development, notes:

Youth are not creating digital publics to scare parents - they are doing so because they need youth space, a place to gather and see and be seen by peers. Publics are critical to the coming-of-age narrative because they provide the framework for building cultural knowledge. Restricting youth to controlled spaces typically results in rebellion and the

destruction of trust. Of course, for a parent, letting go and allowing youth to navigate risks is terrifying. Unfortunately, it's necessary for youth to mature. (¶ 38)

Although boyd is commenting specifically about adolescents and their parents, her words ring just as true for traditional college students and their universities. boyd's theory dovetails nicely with theories of student development such as Chickering and Reisser's Seven Vectors (particularly the fifth vector, *establishing identity*) (1993) and Baxter Magolda's theory of self-authorship (1998).

Students can and do form and sustain meaningful relationships and communities online. Their ability to experiment with their online identity in environments such as those provided by Facebook and MySpace is critical to their development. As with many other powerful learning opportunities, universities must balance their desire to guide students away from costly and dangerous online mistakes with students' legitimate need and rightful desire to experiment with communications technologies and their online identity.

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