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PROMISING PRACTICES IN ONLINE LEARNING

Socialization in Online Programs

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About *Promising Practices in Online Learning*

Online learning within K-12 education is increasing access and equity by making high quality courses and highly qualified teachers available to students. Online learning programs offer courses, academic credits and support toward a diploma. They vary in structure and may be managed by a state, district, university, charter school, not-for-profit, for-profit, or other institution. Thirty states and more than half of the school districts in the United States offer online courses and services, and online learning is growing rapidly, at 30% annually. This growth is meeting demand among students, as more than 40% of high school and middle school students have expressed interest in taking an online course.

The most well established K-12 online learning programs are more than ten years old, and many programs have between five and ten years of operating experience. The newest programs are building on the expertise of those early adopters, as well as the experience of online learning in postsecondary institutions and the corporate world. A body of knowledge, skills and practices has been developed by individual programs, in collaboration with practitioners, researchers, and policymakers. Because there are so many types of online programs (full-time, supplemental, state-led, district-level, consortium), there are also many different approaches to teaching, student support, professional development, and other issues.

This series, *Promising Practices in Online Learning,* explores some of the approaches being taken by practitioners and policymakers in response to key issues in online learning in six papers being released throughout 2008:

- Blended Learning: The Convergence of Online and Face-To-Face Education
- Using Online Learning for Credit Recovery and At-Risk Students
- Socialization in Online Programs
- Funding and Legislation for Online Education
- Oversight and Management of Online Programs: Ensuring Quality and Accountability
- A Parents' Guide to Choosing the Right Online Program

The title, *Promising Practices*, deliberately avoids the term "best practices." There are too many approaches to online learning, and too many innovative teaching and learning strategies in the 21st century, for one method to be labeled "best." Instead, this series aims to discuss the issues and explore examples from some of the many online programs across the country, with a goal of illuminating some of the methods showing the most promise.

Online learning offers the advantage of personalization, allowing individualized attention and support when students need it most. It provides the very best educational opportunities to all students, regardless of their zip code, with highly qualified teachers delivering instruction using the Internet and a vast array of digital resources and content. Through this series of white papers, we are pleased to share the promising practices in K-12 online learning that are already underway.
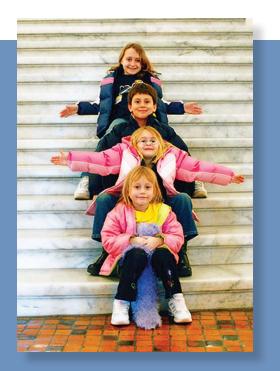
Socialization in Online Programs

"It was not long ago that I had a student in my course who was afflicted with cerebral palsy. As students introduced themselves to their online classmates at the start of the semester, this student mentioned his disease, and I was surprised at the reaction of his fellow classmates. Curious students began to ask questions to try to understand what he was going through and then offered empathy and support for his courage. As the class continued throughout the semester, we all learned about what it means to have cerebral palsy. Jason was not involved in the same social structure that other students could experience; he did not play sports or go to social events, and instead had to spend much of his time at doctors' appointments and monitoring his health.

As a teacher, I was touched by the relationships that formed during the class, and found it fascinating that students could be so honest and caring online when they may not have reached out to each other in a face-to–face classroom. In the online classroom students are lucky not to be judged by the clothes they wear or the color of their skin. It does not matter if they are tall or short, large or small, or battling cerebral palsy. Students are free to express themselves and their views in a forum where they are heard and usually appreciated. They usually feel that they will be listened to and accepted in expressing their views and what is inside them. The social structure of the online classroom allows for a personal freedom for students that they may not have experienced before.

As I continue to teach online, I am still learning the many merits of this learning environment for my students. I find that not only do students take responsibility for their learning, but also they are stripped of the inhibitions of appearance, and are able to form genuine friendships and share heartfelt information that they may never share in other learning environments."

— Casey Ross, Teacher and Science Department Chairperson, Michigan Virtual High School

How can online schools provide the necessary pieces for students' social development and also demonstrate creative ways to enhance socialization by breaking down barriers of time and place? This paper explores the issues around socialization in online schools, and how online programs are addressing these issues.

Students from the Commonwealth Connections Academy gather on the steps of the State Capitol of Pennsylvania to learn how their state government works and to have a little fun.

The evolution of socialization

Researchers studying socialization in online learning note that definitions are quite broad, suggesting that "Socialization is about people being able to mingle and establish connections on one or more levels. They speak [with] one another; share ideas and information and confirm the connections made through an agreed upon means."[1] More broadly, and outside of the learning environment, sociologists define socialization as "the process by which, through contact with other human beings, one becomes a self-aware, knowledgeable human being, skilled in the ways of a given culture and environment."[2] Often, the school is the "agency responsible for socializing groups of young people in particular skills and values in our society."[3] Other definitions explicitly note the need for "interpersonal and interactional skills," or focus on the need for students to "develop social skills appropriate to his or her social position and the need to be prepared for a profession."[4] While these definitions cover a broad range of concepts, clearly students need a variety of experiences and exposure to differing views and perspectives to develop the skills to think for themselves and effectively handle new situations.

Because a child or teenager spends so much time in school, the educational environment is clearly a key part of the student's socialization. Most students are involved in activities outside school that are socially formative, but the simple fact that the typical child spends more time "at school" (whether a physical school or online) than in any other activity suggests that the school will have a large impact on students' socialization.

In many traditional schools this socialization process is largely a by-product of the educational environment. Students are segregated by age and placed in a setting that provides little interaction with adults other than their teachers. Further, in a physical school many procedures and policies are tied to limiting social behavior that is deemed inappropriate or not conducive to the lecture-style learning environment. Relatively few policies and instructional techniques are specifically designed to foster "pro-social" and collaborative behavior. In addition, students are largely left to their own

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[1] Socialization in the Online Classroom, Irwin, C., and Berge, Z., e-Journal of Instructional Science and Technology, Vol. 9 No. 1, March, 2006, http://www.usq.edu.au/electpub/e-jist/docs/vol9_no1/papers/full_papers/irwin_berge.htm
[2] Introduction to Sociology, 5/e, Giddens A., Duneier M., & Appelbaum R., W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.
[3] Socialization, Long, R., August, 2007, retrieved May, 2008 www.delmar.edu/socsci/rlong/intro/social.htm
[4] Socialization in the Online Classroom, Irwin and Berge, March, 2006

Friendship transcends appearance

One teacher hosts a weekly chat of students across age and curricular groups to break down barriers. It is a social chat, although the English teacher is able to moderate in a way to bring instructional content into the chat. Two girls that met and became fast friends through these weekly chats finally had an opportunity to meet on a field trip sponsored by the online program. Upon meeting they were surprised by what they did not know about one another — one girl was white and one African-American. Within a few minutes, the surprise wore off and they spent the entire afternoon hand-in-hand, chatting as if spending hours in their online environment.

devices in dealing with social interactions outside the classroom, but still within the confines of the school, including recess and extracurricular activities.

Online schools, in contrast, often put significant resources into creating ways to foster appropriate social interaction. This effort stems in part from the concern that students may otherwise be isolated, but it also builds on the recognition that the online environment is a natural way for Millennial students to interact, and that the Internet allows for student-student interactions across geographical boundaries that transcend the possibilities within physical schools. In many ways online programs offer socialization opportunities that go beyond what most traditional schools can provide, whether it is taking part in a discussion with students from another country, or meeting students from across their state on a field trip or science competition. In addition, the online environment eliminates, or greatly reduces, issues that may create social friction, such as appearance, gender, age, ethnicity, physical disabilities, academic progress (e.g., at-risk or drop out students) or socio-economic status.

Online learning's capacity to foster interaction and collaboration among a diverse and geographically dispersed group of students is among its most positive attributes. "Collaborative learning theory is based on social and intellectual interaction," writes Jeanette MacDonald in *Is 'As Good as Face-to-Face' As Good As It Gets?* "It relies on participants sharing information, insights, personal experience and perspectives in the hope of gaining appreciation and understanding of other views and potentially creating new knowledge."[5] In fact, researchers consider the "increased social distance" that online learners enjoy a positive dynamic that creates a more democratic environment for communication while giving learners time for research, reflection and the development of ideas that classroom interactions may not.[6]

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[5] Is 'As Good as Face-to-Face' As Good As It Gets? MacDonald, J., Journal for Asynchronous Learning Networks (JALN), Vol. 6, Issue 2, August, 2002
[6] Augmenting a group discussion course with computer-mediated communication in a small college setting, McComb, M., Interpersonal Computing and Technology, 1(3), 1993

Socialization in online programs can be categorized into one or more of several categories that are discussed below:

- Interaction with a teacher or other adults within the online class
- Communication with other students within the online class
- Online communication and activities facilitated by the school but outside of class activities
- Activities that involve bringing students together in physical locations
- Social networks and Web 2.0 technologies. [7]

Interaction with the online teacher

The starting point for understanding socialization in online schools is the recognition that good online schools build extensive teacher-student, teacher-parent, and student-student communication into their courses and programs. Quality online courses are not simply print correspondence courses in which the text is delivered via the Internet. Instead, they are rich in media, communication, and interaction. A high level of interaction and quality communication is not a simple undertaking. Online teachers must find ways to compensate for the loss of physical cues and non-verbal communication, and deal with the resulting occasional miscommunications and the "lack of socio-emotional communication."[8] The online learner must master a new role that includes knowledge and acceptance of the learning environment, new and expanded ways of communicating with teachers and peers (i.e., email, threaded discussion, chat rooms, blogs), and the levels of personal responsibility and independence that online learning requires and provides.[9] This communication and interaction is based around the course content, so may not be directly tied to the socialization of online students, but it provides the building blocks of the online school community.

Much of the responsibility for modeling positive social skills for online learners rests with the teacher, just as in the physical classroom. In *Enhancing Students' Socialization: Key Elements,* Jere Brophy notes, "Key elements of successful student socialization include modeling and instruction of prosocial behavior; communicating positive expectations, attributes, and social labels; and reinforcing desired behavior. Consistent projection of positive expectations, attributes, and social labels to students may have a significant impact on fostering self-esteem and increasing motivation toward exhibiting prosocial behaviors."[10]

"Thoughtful, caring communication is at the heart of any learning experience — at a distance it's life or death," says David Teeter, Assistant Director of Instruction at Apex Learning. "Student socialization really begins with the enrollment of the online student and the introduction to the teacher. The teacher must establish close personal contact with an online student to demonstrate

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[7] The term Web 2.0 describes the trend in the use of advanced Internet applications to facilitate greater collaboration among users, as well as enhance creativity and information sharing among users. Internet applications including blogs, wikis, and social networking are generally considered Web 2.0 technologies and are mentioned as tools used in promoting student socialization in this paper. For definitions and explanations of Web 2.0 technologies, here are two of many web sites: http://instructionwiki.org/Glossary_of_Web_2.0_terms and http://www.socialsignal.com/blog/alexandra-samuel/web-2-0-glossary.

[8] Is 'As Good as Face-to-Face' As Good As It Gets? MacDonald, J., JALN, Vol. 6, Issue 2, August, 2002

[9] Student Role adjustment in online communities of inquiry. Model and instrument validation, Garrison, D.R., Cleveland-Innes, M. & Fung, T. JALN Vol. 8, Issue 2, April, 2004

[10] Enhancing Students' Socialization: Key Elements, Brophy, J., ERIC Digest, retrieved June, 2008, http://www.ericdigests.org/1997-1/key.html
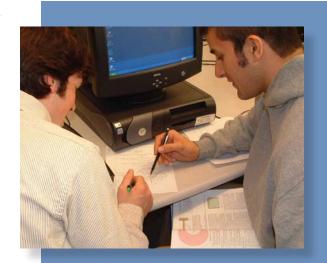
the social connection, so they know that they have places to turn. Whether it is the teacher, an on-site mentor, technical support staff, or the student's own parents, the child needs to know there is a support network for them to rely on." Many online programs establish procedures to provide timely feedback and problem resolution for both students and parents, and teachers are often trained on techniques to help form closer personal relationships. Often it is as simple as discussing extracurricular activities whether it's how the basketball game or school play went, or the latest music downloaded to an iPod or uploaded to a MySpace page.

Online instructors must develop and master other basic skills necessary to aid students in socialization, including developing personal relationships with students, providing reassurance regarding their welfare, closely monitoring the students' performance, intervening frequently to keep them engaged in academic activities, questioning students in ways that are likely to motivate them to talk freely, insisting that the students accept responsibility for their academic work and controlling their own behavior, developing productive relationships with parents, and dealing with student problems in a sustained way outside of class time.[11] Although Brophy presents these attributes as those necessary for a classroom teacher to adequately model and motivate positive socialization for students, it applies equally to the characteristics necessary to be a successful online teacher, and to the structure and support provided by successful online learning programs across the country.

Interaction with other students in the online class

Of course, socialization goes well beyond interaction between the student and teacher. It is also built into the curriculum, instruction, technology and extracurricular activities of successful online programs. One important element of socialization for many programs is that courses are designed to incorporate peer-to-peer communication, including both one-to-one contacts and group projects.

Two students review an assignment from their online Advanced Placement® calculus course from the Virtual High School Global Consortium.

Modern, technology-based approaches to effective communication at a distance are certainly part of the socialization equation. Students at Florida Virtual School, for instance, develop socialization skills through school projects and academic activities that require collaboration via technology as well as face-to-face. Real-time web conferencing tools that integrate chat, voice, webcam and whiteboard technologies help facilitate these projects online. Online educators note that this is similar to communication practices in the real world, where companies often have employees from different offices collaborating on projects, and in fact this approach helps to more effectively prepare students for the 21st century workplace.

[11] Ibid

Michigan Virtual School is using synchronous tools and software such as *Team Speak* and *Adobe Connect Professional* in world language courses to give students more in-depth interaction and a chance to hear, and speak, the language they are learning. Students are able to converse and react with the instructor and each other, participating in dialogues and cultural experiences. MVS is beta testing the techniques before incorporating the use of the tools into other, larger courses across the curriculum such as U.S. History and Advanced Placement® courses.

Changing technologies have led to evolving methods of creating interaction in online programs. For example, the Virtual High School Global Consortium (VHS) has progressed in its use of technology and instructional techniques to bring students closer together. Because VHS operates across the U.S. and dozens of foreign countries, students have the opportunity to meet others across wide geographic areas. VHS builds peer-to-peer interaction into the curriculum of every course through traditional online learning tools such as threaded discussion and journaling. It also uses newer applications such as wikis and blogs to take the amount and depth of student interaction to new levels. Rather than journal in a Word document, often shared only with the teacher, blogs give students a one-to-many vehicle with which to share their assignments, thoughts and ideas. The blog remains within the secure course environment and may or may not be shared based on the preference and instructional goals of the teacher. The use of wikis provides a collaborative environment to share content and ideas in a more immediate process than sending emails back and forth. Changes to content are made or discussed immediately in a shared format.

A web of social connections

Hamilton County Virtual School (HCVS) in Tennessee is now building a "web" of communication to improve social connections between teachers and HCVS staff through email, wiki development and now blogging. The program is designed to keep teachers connected and motivate them to improve their own 21st century skills to keep pace with students and to make the learning experience relevant to the student. HCVS has developed a fast-growing wiki to disseminate information and training, and as a reference for all users of the system. The entire community of users is collaborating to build, edit and revise one another's content while providing a new tool for the online program to train new staff and manage the operation. A blog for summer school teachers with RSS feeds has been launched, with plans to expand the blog to students beginning in the fall (2008). The wiki and blogs are not only for content, but to create new social interactions, build personal relationships and broaden the HCVS virtual community.

Another level of socialization at VHS is the communication that goes on between students, in the chat area or via emails, that deals with concepts and content that are outside of the "regular" course and are not directly related to the course content. These activities are all launched from a link within the course environment to provide a level of safety for students.

Online educators recognize that these technologies may be new to them, but they are simply an extension of what students have grown up with. "We're trying to meet students where they live, so to speak, to break our old habits. We didn't experience what these kids are experiencing. We're just trying to stay a few steps behind the students in their ability to use the technology to build community and relationships, rather than 2–3 generations behind them," notes Dr. Donna Scribner, Chief Learning Officer at VHS. "In some ways, we're the immigrants in their world and we have to adjust to the students social environment."

Online collaboration also allows for new and different types of academic programs. For example, Michigan Virtual School established a new academic program in 2007, Online Scholars Community Advanced Research (OSCAR), for high school students who want an opportunity to conduct in-depth research on diverse topics outside of the constraints of a traditional school setting. "Employing collaborative and virtual teaming skills, OSCAR participants use online tools and the Internet to work in research teams of two or four students from different schools around the state. Research teams develop topics of investigation based on student interests. The learning experience teaches students to communicate effectively online, collaborate as a member of a virtual research team, present research findings to various audiences using multimedia tools, and contribute to other scholarly communities."[12]

Although most online programs are primarily asynchronous, many selectively use synchronous activities to bring students together. In a VHS Mandarin Chinese course, students work together in real-time to practice the emphasis on the spoken word, meeting other students from across the country and world as they speak, listen, and respond. When synchronous collaboration in global classes poses difficulties for some students due to time zone conflicts, VHS archives the conversations for other students to access asynchronously. While this does not allow these other students to be part of the live conversation, it does allow them to pick up the conversation in the next interactive session.

Working across geographic boundaries expands students' horizons in ways that transcend most classroom experiences. "We try to give kids a safe environment in which to interact with peers and see the world through a different set of eyes," says Scribner. "During the Sichuan earthquake in China this spring, our students were able to interact online with Chinese students affected by

A field trip to the museum provides online students an opportunity to learn about the history of industry in their region.

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[12] The Michigan Online Learning Report, January, 2008, Michigan Virtual School, http://www.mivu.org/upload_1/MiOnlinePrimer_web_RPT.pdf

the quake, which made the disaster more personal and real. There is real value in our students experiencing the perspectives and attitudes of peers halfway around the globe."

Sevenstar Academy, another online school with students from around the world, saw an opportunity to promote interaction as a way to increase the sense of student community. "Our discussion forums relate to specific course assignments and allow the American student living in Beijing to learn the perspective of an American teenager in Alabama," says Mark Beadle, Head of School, Sevenstar Academy. "The American teenager also learns the perspective of a Muslim student from Hong Kong or a student working from an Internet cafe in Nairobi. We also have blogs that allow students to share perspectives and feelings. We know students love to share online—too much sometimes—and we wanted to use this in a positive way." Structured interaction is built

Shakespeare meets the World Wide Web

Early in 2008 Florida Virtual School hosted the first Virtual Shakespeare Festival, a week-long array of Shakespeare-related activities featuring guest speakers from the Orlando Shakespeare Theater, University of Florida, University of Wisconsin, Indiana University and other higher education institutions, along with FLVS teachers. The festival gave students, parents and other attendees a chance to learn about the geometry of the globe theater, Elizabethan beliefs about science and the body and personality, and connections between Shakespeare and mythology. Students had the opportunity to participate in academic activities such as writing a playbill and rewriting a script. One session on the use of Shakespeare analogies in music, movies and prose drew over 200 attendees over two days and provided an hour of action-packed visual and audio media that had the students captivated.

In an effort to increase participation, a Shakespeare Idol competition was sponsored and advertised. Students had a month to complete their entries in the reality show-inspired competition that included scripts, animation, playbills and essays. Teachers provided feedback to the students on their projects, but it was the online votes of their peers that determined the final Idol winner. "Our goal for the virtual festival was to bring academics, fun and social interaction together in an experience that students not only related to, but participated in," said Cindy Knoblach, Student Activities Coordinator at FLVS. "The project achieved its goal of exciting kids to the point of talking to family and friends about the virtual festival and going online and viewing the Shakespeare Idol projects."

into classes through chats, instant messaging, threaded discussions and in group assignments. For example, a sixth grade course asks the students to read a book in which a 10-year-old boy wants a bicycle. The students are asked to construct a Venn diagram of their own needs and wants regarding a new bike. They are then instructed to work through their Sevenstar contacts in a foreign country to ask a native citizen questions about his/her needs and wants, from what is obviously a very different perspective. Students then make another Venn diagram that includes the perspective of a person from another country, which is shared through a threaded discussion.

Online activities facilitated by the school outside of class

Full-time online schools share many of the student collaboration goals of the primarily supplemental programs discussed above. In addition, in many cases these schools offer opportunities for students, and sometimes families, to meet online in ways that go beyond school activities. For example, Connections Academy schools sponsor virtual clubs that combine students from across the country, promoting interaction among diverse student populations and exposing students to broad-ranging perspectives. Online organizations include debate and book clubs, a national student newspaper, and production of a Connections Academy yearbook. In 2008, Connections launched a proprietary interactive chessboard with built-in intelligence to give students of all ages an opportunity to interact in their area of interest. Although grade levels separate some online activities at Connections Academies, when it comes to playing chess it's all about ability. The software has been developed as a gaming engine that will now be modified and used for a variety of educational purposes across interest areas and curriculum.

Students of all ages gathered for a Celebration Day to conclude the Ohio Virtual Academy school year with a fun-filled day at the park. They enjoyed outdoor parachute activities, team relay races, sunshine and companionship at a local park in southwest Ohio.

Similarly, Insight Schools offer online clubs and activities ranging from book, photography and art clubs, to school newspapers, student government associations and yearbook organizations. Insight conducts "All School Assemblies" that bring students from across the country together to attend real-time online sessions that have included guests such as a Holocaust survivor talking about the personal experience of living history, and an Olympic athlete speaking to students about establishing goals and achievement.

The Ohio Virtual Academy (OHVA), one of the largest online public schools operated by K12 Inc., sponsors Backyard Greenies wildlife conservation club, and is hosting "A Day in the Life of a Zookeeper" with special

A curious student and his schoolmates get up-close with the collection at the local State Museum of Pennsylvania.

guest Jack Hanna, nationally recognized animal expert and zoo director. Using live web collaboration software, club members, other OHVA students, and families log on to learn what life is like when you work with wild animals for a living. "The club is looking forward to sharing this fun, interactive learning opportunity with students across the country," says Ellen Baugh, organizer of the Backyard Greenies. "We know that wildlife conservation is something to be taken seriously and that it can be a lot of fun. With our special guest and over 1,400 families registered for the event already, we anticipate this will be our greatest event to date!"

K12 Inc. has developed an interactive online community experience for students of all ages. Through the K[12] Community Chest students can connect, share ideas through discussion groups, and even communicate with K[12]'s Chief Learning Officer. K[12] incorporates a variety of Web 2.0 applications where students can "chat" with a friend on the way to class, join a group discussion in the "hallway," stop by the office to talk with a teacher or guidance counselor, or join a number of after-school clubs. Students have the opportunity to create dynamic friendships and socialize in a vibrant community with their peers in K[12] partner schools here in the U.S. and across the world.

These types of extracurricular online activities are not limited to full-time programs. Florida Virtual School, which is primarily supplemental, employs a full-time Student Activities Coordinator to enhance the growing number of student activities that include an online newspaper, a number of honor society chapters, the FLVS art gallery, science club, and a chapter of the Future Business Leaders of America.

Real world student activities

In addition to online extracurricular activities, full-time online schools often create opportunities to bring students together for real-world activities. For example, K12 Inc. has created the Making Waves Leadership Conference, an intensive summer program where selected K[12] students from across the country come together to build friendships, participate in collaborative projects, and learn and exercise leadership skills. This program is designed to give students the know-how, the motivation, and the confidence to make a difference in the world around them. It challenges students, "If you've ever wanted to make a difference in your community—or the world—but didn't know how or where to begin, here's your opportunity." Students must apply for the conference by submitting an essay describing how they would make a difference in the world, such as by helping to build houses for Habitat for Humanity, organizing a community clean-up, or starting a fundraising foundation.

Another K[12] project, Operation Lemonade Stand Weekend, is mobilizing thousands of kids across the country to join in the fight against childhood cancer. On a June 2007 weekend, more than 1,500 Operation Lemonade stands were registered across the country by K[12] parents, students, and teachers to raise money for the Alex's Lemonade Stand Foundation, a leading national charity that has raised over $19 million for pediatric cancer research.

Connections Academy has also built face-to-face gatherings into the culture of its online schools across the country. Each school is required to develop a group of community coordinators— parent volunteers who work closely with school staff to organize and execute monthly field trips. Based on annual parent surveys, Connections believes that nearly 50% of all students and families attend these face-to-face activities, and in 2007-2008, 89% of parents attending field trips rated the experience either excellent or good, reflecting the positive perception of these social activities.

Connections Academy community coordinators develop and lead field trips and social activities, ranging from museum and zoo visits to gathering for symphonies and afternoons at a water park. "One of our newest and most successful approaches has been to arrange occupational field trips: a veterinarian, an optician, a rancher," says Trish Sevits, a Community Coordinator for Colorado Connections Academy. "The optician brought out models of the eye, let the kids use 3-D glasses to learn about optical illusions and demonstrated eye health. He made the experience very interactive. At a local youth ranch, kids had the opportunity to feed the horses, lead the animals around the corral, and learned how to handle tack and how to groom the horses." One goal for the 2008 school year for Sevits is to increase the connection between the field trips and the school curriculum that already exists. "I submit any proposed field trip or social activity to one or more educators at the school, and we try to build curriculum into each activity." The value of giving students the opportunity to interact face-to-face goes beyond friendship, according to Sevits. "The students benefit from the friendships they build for sure, but it's spending time with other students that are learning online, learning in the same environment that they are learning in, that really makes the field trips and socialization activities so meaningful for the children."

The social opportunities for online students seem as endless as those for traditional classroom students. A common perspective of parents of online students is that there are so many socialization opportunities that they have to cut back on activities, not look for more.

Each spring, high school students from Insight School of California participate in the time-honored tradition of attending their school prom. Prom provides students the opportunity to meet many of their classmates, teachers and school administrators in person to deepen the relationships already established through online interaction.

Students from 'News in a Click,' the Florida Virual School Newspaper Club, use their cell phones to capture a session of the High School Writers Workshop at the Poynter Institute in St. Petersburg, FL.

"Honestly, we can tend to overdo it because of the stigma [need for socialization for online students] that is out there, and overdoing it is a cause of burnout," says the parent of a student in a K[12] school.

Social networks

Social networks are collections of Web 2.0 technologies that are used to help build online communities through communication, collaboration, content creation and distribution. Facebook, MySpace and Second Life are the most obvious examples of social networking sites populated by users participating in a mish-mash of cultural exchanges. The early dominance of these sites has created a perception around social networking that overshadows the potential of the underlying technologies for education. Understandable concerns on the part of parents and educators have slowed acceptance of the potential value of social networking in online and traditional educational environments where the tools are being used ever more frequently by students and teachers. Social networking has become part of the fabric of teen life, and online educators are starting to harness the phenomenon as a way to provide greater socialization opportunities within the educational framework. For example, Cory Plough, a teacher at Odyssey Charter Schools in Las Vegas, began experimenting with a social network using Facebook as a way to foster more meaningful and personal communication between his students. Concerns over outside influences and parental concerns over safety led Plough to a more education-friendly option at Ning.com, a new social networking tool. Ning.com allows users to create a closed social network without the distractions and level of transparency that raised concerns over Facebook. The school's network is by invitation only, so no unauthorized viewers can look into the Odyssey network and teachers are easily able to authenticate network members and monitor the upload of content onto the network.

Several key goals drove the development of the school's social network:

- Build a community around the school, to help give students pride and a sense of ownership in their online school.
- Build more communication between students outside the academic assignments and requirements.
- Build a social network focused on educational uses, without the cultural distractions that permeate public networks like MySpace or Facebook.

Safety in online social environments

As teens and younger children spend more and more time online, concern is growing about their safety, both while online and in the physical world. Concerns include cyber-bullying, and the possibility of adults lurking, perhaps posing as teens, in cyberspace frequented by students.

Online schools often establish policies for conduct, and monitor chat rooms to address concerns over appropriate student behavior and safety. For example:

- Schools may limit chat rooms to those enrolled in a specific course.
- Learning management systems provide the ability to close the chat room unless a teacher is present.
- Guidelines and procedures for conduct are usually established and enforced by the online program.
- Chats are logged to provide monitoring in either synchronous or asynchronous modes.
- Teachers are usually required to spend time in any school-sponsored online venue to help monitor and motivate conversations and weave in academic rigor.
- Online programs may employ secure social network software or providers when sponsoring social networks.

Parents of many online students realize that if the online school is diligent about safety issues, it can create an online environment that is better monitored than the usual school grounds. In addition, parents realize that the large majority of students today are going online, sharing their lives on MySpace and other sites, whether being on the Internet is part of their school life or not.

"More and more, kids are using the Internet for social interaction regardless of its connection with school," says Lisa Gillis, Executive Director at Insight Schools. "We provide a monitored, protected online environment where students participate in required training that includes cyber safety and online etiquette. After completing the mandated course, we believe our kids will be better prepared to handle social interactions in the public areas of cyberspace because of the instruction they receive through their online education."

Students, teachers, and parents from the Idaho Virtual Academy, a K¹² online school, attend one of many end-of-the-year school outings across the state to learn, meet other students and simply have fun. An expert from a local zoo teaches the students about snakes and reptiles during a live animal exhibition.

The network has given students a new tool to actualize their interests. One student elected to research the effects of climate change on wildlife for the required study skills course at Odyssey. Her passion led her to a desire to raise funds for wildlife protection, and her research led her to the World Wildlife Fund as an organization that she wanted to help. She turned to her teacher for the steps she should take within the network to form an interest group; post a discussion, email friends, and announce a group meeting. A small group was formed and they met on campus to discuss and decide on fundraising opportunities (Odyssey Charter Schools requires students to attend the classroom setting one day per week). In about a month, these socially connected and socially aware students had gone from the start of an idea to generating donations for a worthy cause that they discovered on their own.

The network is student-centered, and only a few teachers are involved in monitoring the site for safety and online etiquette. "[The network] has been successful because the students have been treated with respect and taken full ownership of the network," says Plough. "They know they have a place to go where they can open up and talk about topics that have really deep meaning in the lives of teenagers."

The use of social networks for educational purposes reflects the approach of meeting students where they live. A study from the National School Boards Association found that students ages 9-17 spend as much time on social networking as they do watching television. "Eighty-one percent [of students with online access] say they have visited a social networking Web site within the past three months and 71 percent say they use social networking tools at least weekly," the report states. Those responses may not seem surprising, but 50% of the students say they talk specifically about schoolwork. Students are online, creating and communicating with peers in social networking environments.[13] Although the use of networking for student socialization in an educational context is in its infancy, online schools are leading the way in demonstrating innovative ways to use technology in education.

Conclusion: socialization in the Internet age

Whether focusing on fully online or supplemental coursework, successful online programs address concerns over socialization by providing a range of activities for their students. These include class-based interaction and communication, as well as field trips, student clubs, and other extracurricular activities that are a mix of online and face-to-face events.

[13] Creating and Connecting, National School Boards Association, July, 2007, http://www.nsba.org/site/view.asp?CID=63&DID=41340

Compared to traditional classrooms, the online environment provides several benefits in socializing students. Online students are able to self-select the peers with whom they develop virtual friendships, and to find others with similar goals and interests – which is particularly valuable considering the level of insecurity during the teen years. Often students in the physical schools move through their education with the same cohort from a young age, and are constricted by the social mores of a group, or by a geographic region. Online students can not only feel less peer pressure due to physical issues (i.e., dress, ethnicity, age, social skills), but can feel free to choose with whom to communicate.

Online connections are fostering other positive developments:

- There is greater collaboration across grade levels in online learning, a structural and social barrier seldom breached in the physical school. Online activities and events encourage communication among various age groups, often teaching accountability and responsibility as older students take on leadership and mentoring roles for younger students. Younger students often learn more readily from older students.

- Cross-curricular communication takes students outside the confines of their regular cohort.

- Online interactions help break down social and ethnic barriers.

- Global interactions bring online students in contact with a broad range of cultures, ideas and perspectives.

Even with the success of socialization in online schools, this is clearly an emerging area. Full-time schools, many of whom started with elementary students, now for the first time have relatively large numbers of students who have a history of learning online and are now reaching their middle school or high school years, a time that is particularly important for students' social development. The ways in which these students continue to adapt to the online world, and to bring it into their everyday lives, are likely to grow in ways that educators—and most people over the age of 30—cannot predict. But already, for students of all ages, the Internet has become a major means for communication that drives many of their social interactions, whether personal or school related. "In a survey involving almost 800,000 school-aged children in the U.S., 23% say they are connecting with people around the country – not just in their class, or their neighborhood," notes Diana Oblinger in *Growing up with Google*.[14] "Approximately one third of their friends are people they've never met face-to-face. 'Globally, the average young person connected to digital technology has 94 phone numbers in his or her mobile, 78 people on a messenger buddy list, and 86 people in their social networking community.'"

With the success of socialization among online students, the up and coming issue now confronting educators is how to take the benefits of online learning in breaking down cultural and geographic barriers to create new social experiences for students in the traditional classroom environment. Online socialization techniques and software tools provide opportunities to reach out across school, state and national boundaries, to give all students greater interaction and the ability to make lasting connections with peers.

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[14] Growing up with Google: What it means to education, Diana Oblinger, Emerging Technologies for Learning, Volume 3, 2008

Ultimately, whether a school is fully online, fully face-to-face, or in between, the concerns over socialization boil down to questions of how students will learn about people who are different from themselves, and how will they learn to work through conflict.

"Socialization is less an activity and more a set of skills that online learning programs work hard to address and build in our students," says Mickey Revenaugh of Connections Academy. "Most online programs create socialization activities designed to provide both curriculum-focused interaction and social interactions intended to develop personal relationships. It's critical to look at student socialization through the lens of 21st century students. Considering the level at which online students are connected today, old definitions of student socialization just don't apply any longer."