

Responding to the YOUTUBE and MYSPACE Generation: Thinking Digitally About Today's College Student

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In their introduction to a series of articles on serving students of the millennial generation, researchers Coombs and DeBard (2004) contend that “by exploring the factors that shape a generation’s peer personality and discerning identifying characteristics of that personality, educators can develop more effective policies and practices” (pg. 2). Never is this statement more salient than when determining a set of policies and procedures for student use of virtual communities, social networks, and on-line resources. When trying to set the parameters and boundaries of student internet use, our first and perhaps biggest mistake is misreading the motivations, meanings, and cultural norms of on-line life for this generation of students. What appears to us like plagiarism, slander, copyright infringement, and public embarrassment is seen to many students as an entertaining creative and social outlet. Our efforts to effectively protect and control on-line life is limited by our ability to identify and understand the way in which students think about and interact with the technology.

Not all their thinking is sound, smart, or safe. It is, of course, the thinking of a brain that has not fully developed, complete with the inability to see long-term consequences, to think critically about the impact of an action on others, or to recognize a realistic danger in the thrill of the risk. In many cases, this generation of traditional-age college students has both a brilliant savvy about the creative uses of internet technology and a desperate naiveté about the potential impact that creativity may bring.

Some of our hunches about the problems surrounding on-line community are spot on. But much of what we fear is based on our own generational lens and not the lens of those we’re trying to educate. In this article, I hope to assist the process of policymaking for college student internet use by identifying five key factors of the digital culture that may explain how our students are thinking about the technology, and what we can be doing to help them manage this brave new digital world.

Digital Norm 1: Internet Use as Play

Early research suggests that one of the reasons for the instant popularity of digital technology may be due to the technology’s ability to connect with a key part of our psyches that seeks and desires amusement. Lanham (1993) argues that we are “hard wired” to “play.” Digital technology, with its boundless graphic, video and audio capacity, its fast-paced hyper-leaps to new and distant settings and information centers, and its unfettered access to any and all, make on-line communities a brilliant playground that has attracted millions of young adults to join (and enjoy) the ride. Many of our current students have enjoyed digital play from early childhood; computer games and

sites with personalized, interactive features have been popular for some time. Unlike the Xers and the Boomers, however, millennials have matured alongside the technology. For millennials, the growing sophistication and capacity of the internet has been entwined in their own maturation process to the point where it is difficult to determine the degree of influence one has had on the other. Few millennials marvel at technological advances in the same way that older generations do – new technological capacities are simply expected as routine. The Pew Research Center’s “Generation Next Initiative” put it best when they described this population as “taking their place in a world where the only constant is rapid change” (Kohut et.al., 2007)

College students use the internet for a variety of reasons, but all agree on a simple truth: It’s fun. The most common answer I received when I asked hundreds of students in focus groups and interviews over the past five years about their use of the internet was that on-line life – including downloading (or uploading) movies and music as well as pictures and comments -- is ultimately a recreational activity. Although they understand and utilize the internet as a place for productive work and research, students – like many of us – also go on-line to step away from responsibilities, relax, and play. Other studies have found similar patterns. Strauss’ (2006) research found that 73% of college undergraduates said that the iPod was the most “in” thing for college students. He adds: “Drinking beer and Facebook.com tied for second place. The only other time that beer was replaced as #1 in the survey was in 1997 -- when the internet was considered more popular.” YouTube’s unbridled popularity among young adults (Sweney, 2006), like many of the virtual communities, is due to its entertainment value, even in moments of political and social advocacy. A case in point: While Barack Obama and Ron Paul worked tirelessly to built a one million member Facebook group over weeks, Comedy Central’s Stephen Colbert was able to obtain one million members in his comic race for President in three days (Vargas, 2007).

Interaction is one aspect of the entertainment value of the system, and (unlike Boomers) the current generation has been raised on interacting with and co-creating their entertainment rather than passively absorbing it. “Unlike the passivity of TV, the Web is often interactive,” writes Jean Twenge (2006), “Message boards and chat rooms promote a two-way dialogue -- of information, opinion, and sometimes insult.”

It is the insults -- along with the stalking, cyberbullying, photographed illegal activity, and slanderous depictions of anyone and everyone who (at the moment) has lost favor with the student -- that has Student Affairs professionals and legal counsels most concerned about student life on-line. Like on the playground equipment in the schoolyard, what is intended for fun can still produce bruises and bleeding. The rapid growth of the technology did not include careful forethought to security and other potential byproducts of world-wide interaction, much like our schoolyard playgrounds with steel equipment and cement never imagined what might happen should we fall off the swing. Many of the popular virtual networking sites are only now recognizing their own weaknesses and vulnerabilities and are catching up with better security and enforcement (Trapasso, 2008).

Being unsafe doesn’t make internet play any less exciting; it may actually add to the appeal. College students are particularly vulnerable to the sociological phenomenon of “edgework” (Lyng, 2005), where risk-taking increases the pleasure and excitement of recreational activity. Edgework is what makes roller coasters, cliff diving, and

parasailing such popular recreational activities. The notion of edgework is important to consider for several reasons – it explains the reason why students engage in the activities that become the YouTube uploads and Facebook group photos, and it explains why these posts and high-risk groups are so popular among the college student audience.

Thinking about virtual interaction as play is vital for several reasons. First, it helps us understand the motivations for much of what happens on-line. In many cases, we create inaccurate attributions about student on-line behavior, seeing it as purposed misconduct rather than misdirected recreation. Much of what we see on-line is an (albeit intensified and concentrated) reflection of an entire culture that has turned slander, gossip, embarrassment, moral compromise, violence, and over-exaggerated sexuality into forms of entertainment. These exist in our popular films, our television shows, our computer games, our sporting events, and even our politics. Much of popular internet activity for college students is an intensified evening of MTV special programming. Recognizing entertainment as the key motivation for on-line indiscretions enables us to create more effective interventions and penalties. On-line student life is a perfect educational opportunity about recreation, amusement, and entertainment in the post-modern world.

Second, thinking about the internet as a playground helps us understand the challenge of prohibition; when we attempt to limit or control (or even police) internet use by our students, we find the students who are most interested in high-risk recreation reacting much the same way as they do to our alcohol prohibition policies -- with resistance, hiding, and strategic non-compliance. As many universities began formal or informal “crack-downs” of internet postings, disciplining students in some form or fashion when the student is pictured on-line in an illegal activity or has authored an unflattering post, students quickly became wise enough to make their pages private (another technological innovation that – just in time – allows students to limit access to their posts and pictures), or to eliminate their posts altogether. Students (especially student leaders and athletes with high stakes in faculty/staff/administrator approval) cleaned up their online act in droves. Unfortunately, this didn’t ensure that the high-risk activity came to an end. It simply moved out of the new virtual town square.

The result is, in my mind, a loss for student affairs and other higher education professionals trying to understand how and in what ways students amuse themselves. For a brief period, we had full access to a part of their lives we rarely get a chance to witness. Though we may not have liked what we saw, there were valuable insights that could assist us in designing better environments and producing better policies and procedures to help students through their edgework. For many institutions, that glimmer of awareness has crept back into the dimness of secrecy, and we’ve lost an opportunity to understand how the current student culture amuses itself, and how our educational and residential environment enables or disables aspects of dangerous play.

Digital Norm 2: Virtual Identity as Fictionalized Persona

One of the more difficult concepts for those who were not raised to think digitally is the notion of “virtual identity.” Judith Donath of the MIT Media Laboratory explains:

In the physical world there is an inherent unity to the self, for the body provides a compelling and convenient definition of identity. The norm is: one body, one identity. Though the self may be complex and mutable over time and circumstance, the body provides a stabilizing anchor. Said Sartre in *Being and Nothingness*, "I am my body to the extent that I am." The virtual world is different. It is composed of information rather than matter. Information spreads and diffuses; there is no law of the conservation of information. The inhabitants of this impalpable space are also diffuse, free from the body's unifying anchor. One can have, some claim, as many electronic personas as one has time and energy to create (1999, pg. 29).

For digital thinkers, on-line identity is unfettered by the constraints of real-world identity, where even in our multiple roles and most private moments, there is no escaping the reality of our physical selves. In virtual existence, these limits are gone. The student leader who hosts a weekly bible study on campus and attends multiple community service projects may be a "wild party animal" on-line. The freshman wallflower, ignored in the real-world, may become an international spy, corporate guru, or porn star in the virtual world. One of the discoveries of Dateline NBC's program *To Catch a Predator* was that many of the men seeking sexual encounters with minors on-line were off-line businessmen, community and church leaders, fathers, husbands and neighbors. Assuming that the identities students create for themselves on-line is a simple reflection of who they are in real life is inaccurate. Instead, it may be a reflection of a newfound freedom to explore alternate identities which could never survive in the physical world.

Wild personas and high-risk group names may serve a broader purpose, however. More provocative and interesting profiles or group names tend to find more popularity on the edgy virtual playground. Internet popularity – having multiple friends and members joining your group – may serve as today's quickest route to social capital-building at a time when students are most in need of bridging high-school and hometown friendships and developing new social groups (Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe, 2007). A student trying to find his or her place in a new social setting (or keep that social placement secure) may use edgy and entertaining internet identities as a way of attracting others, who declare their own social status by joining certain groups. The same is true for less edgy internet personas – those who are looking for online popularity through spiritual, intellectual, artistic, or corporate identities.

But these social markers don't need to be based on reality, they just need to be appropriately displayed. Much like the suburban family that is deep in personal debt but still drives a Mercedes or Hummer to sustain the perception of influence among the neighbors, long lists of on-line friends and visitors is rarely indicative of multiple deep relationships or actual achievement of some goal but serves to tell the community that the individual has found a group who identify with their interests and share a virtual membership in the community. Many YouTube videos are laden with social markers such as language and setting that clarify their intended audience as young adult and use edginess as a calling card for downloading. To achieve that popularity, the identities created in virtual worlds don't need to be accurate reflections of an individual's daily life but must possess popular elements of whatever culture that the student seeks membership: high-risk activity, sexuality, spirituality, even anti-authority rhetoric all

serve the same purpose in declaring to the virtual world that “I personify these values and interests.”

It is common, therefore, to see pictures, videos and stories borrowed from other websites or staged for the digital camera. In studying the on-line alcohol environment, I found many duplicated pictures on individual student Facebook and MySpace profiles and group pages – pictures of people who had no direct relationship with the group and were simply lifted from other sites. Although a number of photos or videos were unmistakably “real” in that they pictured the student in a campus or community location, many of them had the marks of being staged to some degree rather than captured as a real moment in time. There is a significant amount of posing in many of the pictures.

With so much fictionalizing, it’s not difficult to realize why most college students are less likely to believe what they see and read on the internet than their older counterparts. They know that digital information is uncensored, unedited, and often imagined rather than real, and this perception of internet information as fiction is creating more significant challenges for institutions that are attempting to educate via the internet. The ACHA National Health Assessment found that, though students were more likely to go on-line for health information, they were less likely to believe it in comparison with other sources (ACHA, 2007). This finding begs the question of whether exposing a student to on-line high-risk behavior encourages similar behavior, as many public health specialists have feared (CAMY, 2004). Students may be quite clear that what they see on-line is the virtual equivalent of a drinking story – entertaining, humorous, and interesting, but also highly exaggerated.¹ The ACHA finding calls into question whether the many websites attempting to educate students about the dangers of alcohol misuse are also perceived as exaggeration.

As *To Catch a Predator* reveals the danger that can occur when the virtual relationships formed out of fantasy attempt to be lived out in the real world, especially when younger adolescents are involved. When coupled with a naive understanding of anonymity, the freedom to instantly create and dissolve new versions of a virtual self has led many an on-line student (and adult) into off-line embarrassment when the two worlds collide. Most students do not understand that, whether real or staged, the presence of the photo, comment, or blog remains forever connected to the individual, despite the best attempts at “virtual suicide” of these fantasy identities through the push of the “delete” button. Once posted, chances are the photo or comment has been replicated as many as 200 times, reposted on places where the student has no power to delete the image. Students are regularly horrified when they conduct Google searches of themselves and discover an image that they had deleted long ago still alive and well on the internet. For many students, what was posted as a harmless amusement has now become an evaluative tool for graduate schools, employers and others, making statements about the young adult’s real-world morality, productivity, and potential (Morgan, 2005).

Understanding the nature of virtual identity is a particularly difficult challenge for higher education professionals, as we must begin to rethink our theories of identity formation and development in order to effectively educate and counsel young adults in their on-line choices. Realizing the fictional nature of many on-line identities, our response to these postings may need to be less punitive and more educational. Each posting offers an opportunity for a conversation about identity integration, an important aspect of emotional and moral development that doesn’t always find its way into the

college experience. At the very least, many universities are taking the opportunity to teach students the harsh realities of internet memory, helping them realize that virtual identities may be harder than imagined to eliminate, and have often come back to haunt a student who has developmentally, socially, and morally “moved on.”

Digital Norm 3: The Global Town Square

At the beginning of the internet craze, foolish mistakes in understanding the nature of privacy on-line led to a host of problems and dangers for students and headaches for administrators and staff. Students, believing that only those who were in their real-world social network would be accessing their on-line information, discovered quickly that there were many, many others watching. Students who put their personal information on-line – telephone numbers, addresses, class schedules – found themselves as victims of stalking, identity theft, and other crimes. Many institutions quickly warned their students about sharing such information, and students began to realize that not everyone viewing your posting had the best intentions. It’s rare to see such information posted now, but there are still students who publicize the next party on-line with the address (and wonder why thieves and the police both arrived uninvited).

The idea that the internet is a public space initially produced a chilling effect in some aspects of on-line life for students. Many felt betrayed by what they see as an intrusion of privacy when unwanted visitors (especially those with judicial interests) access pages meant only as a shared joke among friends (Schweitzer, 2005). Others were turned off by the growing number of adults over 35 who were signing on and stepping into their virtual community (Slatalla, 2007). In response, many students took advantage of the technology that allowed them to block their page from certain eyes, assuming this action would yield some privacy or help groups reclaim their turf. Others simply abandoned the technology altogether.

The notion of a *global public space* is hard for the best of us to wrap our minds around, as it is so vastly different than any other form of interactive technology we’ve ever experienced. But internet technology has created nothing less than a global town square, where even the most benign upload is accessible to anyone – and everyone – with an interest, an internet connection, and a browser/search engine. Students as well as adults have been surprised who has logged on and looked in (Kornblum, 2008).

Understanding that on-line life places the user in the center of the open world, however, has also had a radical impact on student usage of virtual communities in several ways. Students quickly found both their voice and sense of advocacy. A Tufts University study found that the majority of college students belong to at least four on-line political or social advocacy groups (Portney & O’Leary, 2007). YouTube has become much more than a place to post and share music videos; many of its daily video uploads are video blogs (often called vlogs) designed to creatively advocate ideology to a generation raised on video.

Equally impressive is the mastery of creative writing, directing, acting, and video editing shown in many college and young adult YouTube uploads. Good taste aside, the technology has enabled the generation with a creative outlet that rivals the Renaissance. With a global audience in place, millennials are moving from simple hijinks to what Strauss and other millennial researchers have always contended they were capable of:

Postmodern civic engagement. The question remains whether the X and Boomer generation educators and administrators will recognize or appreciate the art form or the political and social forum. At issue is copyright law, which does not hold the same pride and astonishment at a young adult's ability to edit and repost copywritten materials, especially in ways that change the context of the original production. Regardless of their approval, the global town square continues to fill up daily in search of new connections. It would make more sense to harness this digital energy, helping it from legal vulnerability by addressing copyright law in the era of digital creativity and educating students about possible infringements, than attempt to shut it down.

Digital Norm 4: Virtual Socialization as Complimenting Live Community

Perhaps the most shocking finding to come from the research on virtual community is its role in live community. Since the popularity of internet social networks, student affairs professionals and sociologists alike have worried that the trend would lead to a population of students who were isolated and unable to develop healthy "offline" relationships (Fisher & Wright, 2001). Recent studies dispel the myth. "Online interactions do not necessarily remove people from their offline world but may indeed be used to support relationships and keep people in contact, even when life changes move them away from each other" (Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe, 2007).

Rheingold (2000), using theory created by Marc Smith, argues that virtual communities may actually be part of the remedy for the loss of live community. Both Rheingold and Smith believe strongly that American community has dissipated long before the internet took hold, leading to a sense of isolation and a longing for community across all generations. Certainly, the popular book *Bowling Alone* (Putnam, 2000) has become the cultural sentinel of this belief. Rheingold writes:

The three kinds of collective goods that Smith proposes as the social glue that binds the WELL into something resembling a community are social network capital, knowledge capital, and communion. Social network capital is what happened when I found a ready-made community in Tokyo, even though I had never been there in the flesh. Knowledge capital is what I found in the WELL when I asked questions of the community as an online brain trust representing a highly varied accumulation of expertise. And communion is what we found in the Parenting conference, when Phil's and Jay's children were sick, and the rest of us used our words to support them.

There is no question, however, that digital community has significant influences on live community, and institutions of higher education will need to begin thinking creatively about ways to use virtual community as an access point to live social interaction with faculty, other students, and the community. Abundant examples exist – Facebook groups in support of live rallies and publicizing local meetings, YouTube videos of live events that whet the appetite of millennials for more, and faculty use of the technology to create a generational bridge and build their own social capital with students. Connecting internet community to well-designed live social interactions will be a key task for the postmodern institution.

Digital Norm 5: On-Line Community as a Response to Live Barriers

Finally, the digital social culture created by this generation may be an attempt to remedy several weaknesses in the collegiate social system that has negatively impacted college students and might explain much of their stress, negative coping behaviors, and poor retention and graduation rates (Associated Press, 2001). Particularly at large institutions, new students can become lost in a sea of faces, unable to build natural community despite the structure that surrounds them in residence halls or fraternities and sororities. Many institutions have worked hard to rectify this problem by instituting residential learning communities, service-learning projects, and first-year experience programs.

Yet, the heart of community involvement may not be structure, but personal satisfaction. Kollock (1999) contends that virtual community provides three essential motivations for participation. The list may help us understand what's missing on our "off-line" campuses.

Anticipated Reciprocity: Individuals who participate in online communities believe that they will receive reciprocity for their efforts. Someone will write back. A posting will be followed by comments. By the very nature of the technology, response and reciprocal disclosure are part and parcel to the experience. Instant messaging, cell texting, even YouTube uploads result in immediate gratification – a response. Faculty often complain that students expect immediate response to their e-mail inquiries, not realizing that such non-reciprocation is equivalent to ignoring a passer-by who says hello. Many students of the millennial generation feel they are entitled to some reciprocation, and are unhappy when a professor or staff member speaks but won't listen or demands high-quality work but won't share full feedback. If live community is to compete with virtual community, we'll need to take a lesson from the technology, and create reciprocity in our offline interactions with the generation.

Increased Recognition: As mentioned earlier, social capital is gained through internet popularity. But simple recognition is another outcome that's equally important. Our identity formation is dependent upon social feedback, and recognition is a form of social feedback, especially for the new college student trying to find a sense of identity and a place in a new social setting. YouTube videos have brought instant fame to a host of young users, from Lonely Girl to Obama Girl to Brittany Boy, to name a few.² Even judicial penalty for offensive or illegal uploads may lead to social recognition.

Recognition for millennials has become a complicated and problematic issue, as co-eds flock to high-risk parties with the hope of being captured on Girls Gone Wild and young men seek notorious reputations as a way of not getting lost in the crowd. While the university certainly shouldn't condone this approach to fame and recognition, it has done little to replace it. Millennials were raised to believe they are special (Coombs and DeBard, 2004), and limiting their opportunity for self-expression adds a new layer of frustration to an already stressed existence. The university must develop ways in which students can form healthy social identities in their offline lives in order to reduce the use of edgy behaviors as a way to seek recognition.

Sense of efficacy: Thinking digitally about efficacy is critical for universities, as many of the modes of efficacy have changed dramatically due to virtual communities. Creating, editing, and uploading a vlog or a creative composition of videos set to music provides a powerful voice to individuals who may feel voiceless on campus. Creating a Facebook or MySpace group provides a sense of personal empowerment, especially when voicing an opposing viewpoint or expressing mistreatment by those in power. As Time Magazine's 2007 Person of the Year feature indicates, the internet's greatest impact has been its ability to provide voice for the many, many people who had no formal opportunity to speak in the real world.

For students, the need for this empowerment is much, much greater than many of us recognize. Millennials, say researchers, are trained rule-followers, led by the hand since infancy and provided structured activities since early childhood (Coombs & DeBard, 2004). In reality, this generation has learned how to please the adults who structure their lives and seek ways outside of adult influence to gain their own self-efficacy. In fact, they are superb rule-stretchers, rule breakers, and deception artists. But these skills are not due to a simple lack of character development – this generation is also the one most exposed to character education (although they are surrounded by examples of successful individuals in every aspect of society who have violated the principles they studied and recited throughout elementary school. Efficacy, responsibility, an social impact are difficult concepts for the generation to actualize ethically. Virtual community provides a voice, an audience, and now, a host of causes that make a significant difference, if only in the lives of their peers. The virtual response by college students to the Virginia Tech tragedy proves the point.

It is critical, then, that the university finds ways to help students meet their needs for self-efficacy, capitalizing and redirecting the activities found in the virtual community and seeking ways to replicate them on the offline campus.

There is no doubt that as technology continues to change, the generation of students will change alongside it. Our best preparation, then, is to train our own minds to think digitally, just like the students, so that we can best create policies, programs, and interactions that enable a student to connect the two worlds in ways that are productive, satisfying and meaningful.

Notes

1. There is a point to be made by public health professionals about the normative effect that internet exposure has on young adults and adolescents who spend the majority of their time on alcohol-related or high risk sites. The Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth study was particularly concerned about youth who populate alcohol product sites for the interactive games and activities that may have an effect of normalizing alcohol use and abuse as a form of recreation.
2. These are personas on YouTube video uploads. A complete and updated list of top YouTube videos is available at <http://bestofyt.com>.

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