THE ACADEMIC LIBRARIAN & TECHNO-COMMUNICATION:
Facilitating Social Networking with Generation Y Students

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International Federation of Library Associations, Social Science Libraries Section, Satellite Conference

Disappearing disciplinary borders in the social science library - global studies or sea change?

University of Toronto, Toronto, Canada
6-7 August 2008

Sponsored by:

CQ Press
Worldwide Universities Network (WUN)
Center for Global Studies (CGS) at the University of Illinois
University of Illinois Library
University of Toronto Libraries
Faculty Information Studies, University of Toronto

ABSTRACT:

This paper will address the ways in which academic librarians can work to bridge the communication gap with Generation Y students using social networking and techno-communication. Utilizing cyber-communication opens many doors previously shut to educators. Academic librarians, specifically, have much to gain by embracing the trend toward online communication and social networking. Facebook, and other social networking sites like Friendster and MySpace, have helped to dissolve barriers between librarians and students. An online profile can allow, even moderately techno-savvy librarians, a new brand of accessibility to the university community. Academic librarians can gain acceptance and direct access to students, and anyone else in the university network with a Facebook account. Cyber-connected librarians are also able to directly advertise—and even personally invite—online university members to events, inform network users of new library collections, new online databases, upcoming library workshops, and any number of other outreach activities. In addition, a librarian's online profile page can include links to sites designed to help students with citing sources for a paper, RSS feeds to library and university news and events, current national and world news items, book reviews, and personal and reference desk contact information. Other forms of technological communication, such as IM (instant messaging or chatting) can also be a useful tool for the academic librarian.

BIO:

Anne Switzer is an Assistant Professor and Information Services & Outreach Librarian at Oakland University's Kresge Library in Rochester, Michigan. Her mission for

outreach is to have a positive influence on the academic careers of students through increasing their exposure to the library and representing librarians as approachable and responsive to their needs. In an effort to accomplish this, she strives to further interactions with a diverse student population and focus on a variety of multicultural and gender/sexuality centered initiatives. In addition, she actively seeks opportunities to foster connections and partnerships with various campus departments, faculty members, and the surrounding Metro Detroit community. As a teaching library, a key aspect of Kresge Library's mission is to provide a preeminent, student-centered information literacy program.

INTRODUCTION:

Students of Generation Y are fanatical about interactive techno-communication in all its forms. According to a study, published in July 2007 by the National School Boards Association (NSBA) and Grunwald Associates, students are spending as many as nine hours a week chatting, text messaging, blogging, and using online social network sites for a broad range of educational activities. Students, who participated in the study, reported that they log onto the Internet to collaborate on class assignments, complete Web-based coursework, and create wikis (a Web site that allows visitors to add, remove, edit and change content) for academic purposes. The report also suggests that although some educators have been reluctant to experiment with online social networking and other technological forms of communication—one university deemed the use of Facebook to be in violation of its acceptable computer use policy—most

teachers now require some form of Internet use for class assignments. But, what the university who banned Facebook came to acknowledge (eventually allowing access to the site on their campus), is that online social networking, and other forms of techno-communication, have become a solid part of 21st century education. The aforementioned study, comprised of three surveys, highlights the enormous popularity of online social networking sites and discusses some of the potential educational implications of such sites. The study reports that 71 percent of the nine to 17 year olds surveyed use social networking tools at least weekly and that "one of the most common topics of conversation on the social networking scene is education…more than 50 percent talk specifically about schoolwork" (NSBA & Grunwald, 2007, p. 1). The article also suggests that, while school leaders and parents believe there could be a positive, educational use for social networking, little has been done to "explore ways in which [educators] could use social networking for educational purposes" (p. 1). The authors point to educators' inexperience with online social networking sites as the reason for their placing such low value on them as educational tools. The authors contend that "social networking is increasingly used as a communications and collaboration tool of choice in business" and that "it would be wise for schools, whose responsibility it is to prepare students to transition to adult life with the skills they need to succeed…to reckon with it" (p. 8). They conclude by asserting that educational leaders "should work with social networking companies to increase services that are explicitly educational in nature" (p. 8).

DEFINING GENERATION Y:

Most undergraduate college students, having been born after 1982, belong to Generation Y (Gen Y)—the list of alternative names for this demographic seems endless—Net Generation, iGeneration, Generation Media, Generation MySpace, Echo Boom Generation, Digital Generation, or Millenials. Profiles of this group consistently note their technological and Internet savviness. Recent library literature is saturated with articles on defining Gen Y—to further our understanding of this generation's strengths and weaknesses—in order to keep pace with the patrons we are serving. Grasping the needs of this demographic, especially in terms of technology, is essential if academic libraries are to remain relevant to their students.

Kresge Library serves as the only library at Oakland University (OU)—a mid-size, public university (18,082 students—just over 4,000 graduate students and almost 14,000 undergraduate) in the Detroit suburb of Rochester, Michigan. Sixty-seven percent of OU's undergraduate students are between the ages of 17 and 22—and therefore, belong to Gen Y. (Oakland University, 2008) One notable difference between this group of OU students and previous groups of OU undergraduates (aside from their technological skills) is the amount of hours they spend working at jobs while attending college. OU students participated in a national survey that indicated a steady increase in student employment. Forty-nine percent of OU undergraduate students reported that they would get a job to help pay for college expenses—this is up 8 percent from 1991 (and is slightly higher than the national average of 47.2 percent). *The Chronicle of*

Higher Education sited possible reasons behind this trend: "A rapid increase in tuition

brought on by tighter state budgets and a faltering economy, combined with a decline in

the buying power of grant aid such as federal Pell Grants..." (Farrell, 2005, ¶4).

Whatever the reasons, the reality of working as many hours as today's college students

do has resulted in a group of students who have less time to devote to academics—

meaning fewer hours to spend utilizing the library's physical resources. There is a

higher demand for electronically accessible materials and greater need for alternative

delivery of traditional library services. For example, in order to meet the needs of

students, it became necessary for Kresge Library to reinvent itself as the campus'

Information & Technology Center—offering laptops for checkout, fully equipped

computer labs, a writing center with flexible hours, skilled technical assistance from the

staff of the University Technology Services department (newly housed in the library),

and email or IM chat with a reference librarian. Integrating these services into one

location will hopefully assure Kresge Library's importance on OU's campus for today's

students as well as future students.

        To further explicate the distinctive characteristics of Gen Y students, Gardner &

Eng (2005) present findings from their undergraduate library user survey and surmise

that their data supports the existence of four main traits of Gen Y students—high

expectations; expectation of customization; technological expertise; and the utilization of

new modes of communication. The authors discuss these traits within the context of

library use and satisfaction. They further contend that, since there is less emphasis

given to the physical library (students are increasingly relying on electronic delivery of

information—the Internet being the most likely mode of research), academic libraries

should adjust their priorities accordingly. In further explicating the behaviors and

preferences of Gen Y students, the authors provide examples for each of the four

aforementioned traits. For instance, the students surveyed suggested their library be

open 24 hours a day (the library in question is already open nearly 24 hours a day

during the academic year—but some surveyed students suggested greater access

would be preferable). An example of the surveyed students' expectations of customized

service is that, beyond limitless access to the physical library, the undergraduates in this

study expect to find the same resources available to them at the library, be available

from their laptops at any remote location at any time. In terms of technological

expertise, the surveyed Gen Y students see themselves as technologically superior to

their instructors and are, therefore, "unimpressed by [the technology presented] in a

classroom setting" (p.411). As far as communication is concerned, the surveyed

students suggested the library provide more workrooms because they prefer to

collaborate with each other. The authors also suggest that these students don't

necessarily want face-to-face interaction from librarians or teachers. The survey found

that "only a small number of students come to the library with the intention of asking for

any kind of reference (12.6 percent) or computer assistance (2.1 percent)" (p. 413).

Some of the implications for library services offered by the authors include: increasing

the amount of interactive space in the library, ensuring that the technology offered is

well-maintained "since Gen Y students have extremely high expectations when it comes

to technology…and will not tolerate disruptions of service" (p. 414), offer 24 hour

reference service in the form of chat and/or email, invest in laptops for loan, and offer

food services in the library. The article concludes that as a result of the technological preferences of today's undergraduates, academic libraries must rethink the ways in which they present services.

Oblinger & Oblinger's (2006) insights toward understanding the Net Generation (Net Gen) are also focused upon technological considerations, most specifically, in the area of communications. The authors explicate the point that Gen Y college students are digitally literate as a result of the amount of screen media exposure they have had from a very young age. They mention that a common activity for young people is participation in online communities, "showing others what they can do, or voicing their opinions" (p. 2). This generation of students only knows the world as a "connected" place, and "more than any preceding generation they have seized on the potential of networked media" (p. 3). The authors highlight a commonplace characteristic of today's undergraduates: their extreme openness to diversity, differences, and a candidness that older generations do not exhibit to such a broad extent. For example, Gen Y's are very much at ease sharing personal details with strangers they meet online: "The Net Gen has developed a mechanism of inclusiveness that does not necessarily involve personally knowing someone admitted to their group" (p. 4). The amount of time they spend interacting from devices is also notable. The authors contend that Gen Y's are in constant communication with their peers using some electronic device—whether it be a cell phone or a laptop. It is not uncommon for students working together to exchange IMs from a few feet away: "Their communities and social networks are physical, virtual, and hybrid…Online conversations may be as meaningful as one that is face-to-face"

(p.7). The authors state that students use social networks for conversation, collaboration, playing games, and other social interactions to satisfy their craving for interactivity and to provide "an immediate response to their each and every action" (Prensky, 2001, as cited in Oblinger & Oblinger, 2006, p.8). In conclusion, the authors assert that it is important to understand Gen Y students so that colleges and universities can create educational environments that best suit their unique learning style.

IMPLICATIONS OF SOCIAL NETWORKING AND TECHNO-COMMUNICATION FOR ACADEMIC LIBRARIES:

Experience working with Gen Y students has reinforced the importance of technology, both in teaching pertinent information literacy, as well as fostering communication. With this demographic, it seems that the traditional objectives of education must be presented in a manner that will inspire while assuring quick delivery—and the surest mode to accomplishing these goals is electronic. Likewise, using online forms of communication seems to be the preferred approach for Gen Y students. In order to help bridge the communication gap between students and librarians, Kresge Library's staff, administrators, and librarians began using Facebook in 2006. Online profiles have allowed librarians a new brand of accessibility to the university community—they are better able to gain acceptance and direct access to students, and anyone else in the university network using their Facebook accounts. Cyber-connected librarians are also able to directly advertise—and even personally invite—online university members to events, inform network users of new library collections, new online databases, upcoming library workshops, and any number of

other outreach activities. For example, a Facebook group called "Poetry @ Kresge Library" now has over 50 members. This group was has grown largely out of the cyber-buzz stemming from a successful Poetry Slam contest held at the library in the fall of 2007. The group now meets monthly for poetry readings and twice a year Kresge Library hosts slam contests. In addition to outreach for library social events, a librarian's online profile page can include links to sites designed to help students with citing sources for a paper, RSS feeds to library and university news and events, current national and world news items, book reviews, and personal and reference desk contact information. But perhaps the most important aspect to developing an online profile is the opportunity it offers librarians to communicate with students in a manner that is friendly, candid, and interesting. Today's students are most comfortable in front of a screen—so it makes sense that they are so attracted to a method of communication that requires the Web.

Beyond their worth as a communication tool, some academics praise social networking sites for other educationally pertinent merits. Rapacki (2007) asserts that social networking sites provide young people an important means of self-discovery. The author suggests that the fluidity of the Web, especially social networking sites which are constantly being checked and updated, offer opportunities for users to explore and express who they are. For example, a MySpace or Facebook profile has the capability to link to Amazon.com and allows users to attach images of the CDs they're currently listening to, or list books (with an image of the book covers) they like, or movies they recommend or video game ratings. Another appeal of such sites is that they are so

incredibly popular—as Rapacki states, "Social networking sites have become the virtual

commons where teens go to hang out with their friends" (p. 29). He suggests that

librarians, who have not yet created social networking profiles, do so. He contends that

such sites are valuable as a means of communication and engagement with younger

library users.

Vie (2008) discusses a digital divide which she theorizes exists because students

are now more technologically adept than their instructors. She defines this tech-savvy

group of students as being a part of "Generation M" (meaning, according to Vie,

Generation Media, Generation MySpace, or the Millennials). She explains that those in

this age group "spend a quarter of every day interacting with various technologies; the

majority of these individuals live in not just media-rich households, but media-saturated

households." (p. 9). The crux of Vie's article focuses on technology as it relates to

literacy instruction—specifically, in a composition classroom. However, many of the

suggestions the author presents translate well to other areas of academia. Vie contends

that, "[Professors] should focus on incorporating into their pedagogy technologies that

students are familiar with but do not think critically about: online social networking sites,

podcasts, audio mash-ups, blogs, and wikis" (p. 10). She emphasizes the educational

value in the creation of an online profile—the creation of such pages, she suggests,

require a complex, often media-rich skill base. To ignore the opportunity online social

networking sites offer in terms of integrating technological skill and literacy, would,

according to Vie, be to deny their potential pedagogical benefits. She states that there is

good reason for contemplating inclusion of such technology into academia and

suggests that this would also help to close the digital divide.

Facebook does, however, have its critics: Bugeja (2006) discusses what he

believes to be the detrimental influence of information technologies in the classroom,

specifically, the impact of the social networking site, Facebook. The author claims that

the popularity of Facebook has the power to negatively affect all levels of academe.

Because of the amount of online traffic Facebook receives in a day, the author asserts

that (among other issues) there may be "pressure [placed on] provosts to continue

investing in technology rather than in tenure-track positions" and that "career and

academic advisors [will be expected to] deal with employers and parents who have

screened Facebook and discovered what users have been up to in residence halls" (p.

2). Beyond such considerations, the author contends that "academics assessing

learning outcomes often discover that technology is as much a distraction in the

classroom as a tool" (p. 2). However, rather than ban such sites, the author

recommends that students use "interpersonal intelligence" in deciding when and where

such technology may be appropriate (or inappropriate), but, he claims, to make such a

determination "requires critical thinking and suggests that we have reached a point

where we must make hard decisions about our investment in technology and our

tradition of high [academic] standards" (p. 4).

CONCLUSION:

Today's college students expect to find their informational and communication needs met on their computer screens or through using their gadgets. They are extremely "connected" to each other and seem to appreciate that level of connectedness from educators. There is an immediacy in chat and social networking sites that is even faster than cell phone and email use. These types of interactivity are what Gen Y students are most comfortable using. The more literate academic librarians become with communicating in a technology driven manner, the better engaged they will be with the students they serve.

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