

## Internet Society and College Students: Ethnicity, Sexuality, and Cross-Cultural Identity

Many scholars and government officials are concerned with the digital divide in American and global culture. They argue that the racial divisions that exist in the greater culture are mirrored in digital culture, creating the digital divide. Even so, where the broader minority culture in America may find access to and the use of digital technology as a space of alienation, this paper hopes to show how minority – and all – college students can use technology as a comfortable supplement to more difficult academic settings. Though any wide-ranging conclusions about college communities will not apply to all college environments, the plentiful research on this subject should be used to inform classroom pedagogy across academia. Any more, the components of any course – whatever the discipline – should include some use of online curricula in order to address the needs of all students, especially non-white students. What follows will outline examples of how to incorporate online curricula into the college classroom, particularly those activities that encourage cross-cultural identification, challenge racial and sexual stereotypes, allow students to understand people different from themselves, and simultaneously teach critical methods for analyzing Internet technologies and communities. This paper therefore attempts to offer practical rather than theoretical lessons, and I will reveal how useful Internet technology – like social networking sites, virtual worlds, personal web spaces, chat rooms, and forums – can be.

To begin with background, Shelia Cotton and Shameeka Jelenewicz explore the state of the digital divide among college freshman. Cotton and Jelenewicz find that “once individuals begin using the Internet, few racial differences exist,” and they continue by saying their results “suggest that if you bring people together in structured environments (such as at a university) where individuals have assured access, the digital divide seems to dissipate in many of the

traditional ways that we think about the digital divide” (497, 504). The hindrances that make Internet use difficult for minorities in the broader culture seem to disappear in a university setting, making the use of online curriculum in and out of traditional classrooms very important.

My first connection to the topic is anecdotal. My last two freshman composition classes were racially diverse; they were comprised of at least 40-50% non-white students. I found that the minority students communicate with me over email far more than the white students, leading me to believe that Internet usage may be a comfortable environment for minority students. Confirming my suspicions, over 70% of the minority students in both classes also use the social networking utility, Facebook. Though these figures come from a decidedly narrow group of college students, they substantiate my desire to do further research on the subject. The more research I do, the more I find a confirmation of what is true in my classroom, that minorities not only have access to the Internet but make great use of it to their personal and academic advantage. These same students most likely do not realize how the web spaces they frequently use may help them understand their academic worlds, but the following information should help faculty to help their students learn to think critically about their online activities.

To say that social networking sites are popular among students would be an extreme understatement. Friendster boasts over 33 million users, and while Facebook has over 10 million users, it is “the seventh-most trafficked site on the web, and is the number one photo-sharing site (“Friendster,” Zuckerberg). Following my experience and that of my students, I will focus on Facebook. (I will discuss MySpace as a hybrid unto itself during the presentation.) To begin, the self-defined purpose of Facebook is to “develop technologies that facilitate the spread of information through social networks allowing people to share information online the same way they do in the real world” (Zuckerberg). Though it is in many ways dissimilar to the real world,

Facebook literally captivates college age students, securing hours a day of their time. Even so, most academic responses to Facebook conclude that it is a glorified clique rather than an intelligent community, a moral wasteland to be avoided by conscientious students and scrutinized by suspicious administrators. This attitude is illustrated by Michael Bugeja when he says, “Information technology in the classroom was supposed to bridge digital divides and enhance student research. Increasingly, however, our networks are being used to entertain members of ‘the Facebook Generation.’” I believe the perception that the use of our university networks to “entertain” students illustrates our shortsightedness as educators rather than the misplaced captivation of our students.

Using the attention our students give to social networking services like Facebook, interesting and relatable lessons can be used to the benefit of whole classes and offer minority students an opportunity to excel. For example, Facebook allows students to make a profile that other users can view. Though an apparently easy task, there are many decisions to be made about what information is important to share and what information isn’t appropriate online. Challenging students to create a profile that peers, faculty, family, administration, and future employers can view helps students to think about web-based audiences while negotiating their personal and academic lives. Another useful aspect of Facebook is the Groups feature. Members can create groups around virtually any theme, and it is a beneficial exercise for students to research and discuss what motivates group activities, especially with special consideration to groups created around race, media, and social issues. Though there are many more uses for Facebook, a final suggestion for students is to browse pictures that are posted by other students from their institution, asking pertinent questions about the ethnicity of the people depicted. It is

an important lesson to discover whether or not their school is actually as diverse as the university may suggest.

Another online technology that takes social communication a step further is that of virtual worlds. Virtual worlds incorporate chat functions with two- or three-dimensional avatars and landscapes. Second Life and “There.com” are two of the most popular and visually impressive virtual worlds on the net, boasting 1,400,000 and 400,000 users respectively (Linden, Fishkin). Many academic institutions use virtual worlds for distance learning or social research, and students use them to communicate with friends in a hyper-real space. “The Internet has now become the social medium through which individuals with unique identities can express themselves. Now, in these virtual ‘living’ places, people are able to express their values and lifestyles as they might do in the physical real world” (Whang 592). Though students may use virtual worlds to express themselves as they normally would, many students take on personalities that surprise even themselves. Because these virtual worlds require players to create and operate humanoid avatars, issues of sexuality and ethnicity are among the first decisions that players must face. As an example, virtual worlds allow the opportunity for a shy, white, female student to create and act as a boisterous Asian businessman or a refined Hawaiian grandmother. Though the opportunities for experimentation are nearly endless, minority students can be challenged to take on and respond to becoming an avatar distinctly different than themselves. Alternatively, white students can become a person of color, or heterosexual students can experience reactions to homosexuality in a virtual environment. It must be noted that in my experience these online worlds are often as racist and homophobic as the real world, if not more so. Even though this is true, students need to learn how to think intelligently about the stereotypes inherent to online communities.

Perhaps the most fundamental – and yet most complex – online activity is creating a webpage from scratch. Fortunately for the uninitiated, online webpage utilities bypass the coding and programming that a webpage requires, creating the opportunity for anyone to create a webpage. The use of weblogs (a series of reverse-chronologically dated posts) is widespread among Internet users and is also a serious topic of linguistic study. Susan Herring and John Paolillo state, “weblogs make available distinct genres of authorial self-presentation” (454). This is to say that writers make use of weblogs for many reasons; examples of such use are diaries, news filters, sports analysis, and so forth. College classrooms can make use of blogs to do everything from posting announcements to creative writing. “In a school setting, blogs are ideal for sustained conversations involving an entire learning community” (Achterman 29). As a first step, students can be asked to search for weblogs that claim to discuss ethnicity and sexuality. Another option is to maintain a class weblog that allows students to post their thoughts on any assigned subject. An added bonus to this format is that students can comment on posts written by other students. Finally, students can even create their own weblog. The invention process involved in such a task will force students to think about webpage composition and will allow them the freedom to make their views known in a virtual environment.

In his new book, Race, Rhetoric, and Technology, Adam Banks states that the digital divide “is itself a rhetorical problem at least as much as it is a technical or material one” (39). Rhetorically speaking, the popular and personal use of the Internet among college students is viewed as pernicious at worst and a distraction at best. If faculty members are able to see how popular web spaces can be used for profitable academic endeavors, students will begin to see how their personal and academic lives don’t have to be totally separate. More to the point, with

the use of online curricula, minority students will find a comfortable place for academic communication, experimentation, and learning.

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