

University of Minnesota study uncovers the educational benefits of social networking sites

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Low-income students are in many ways just as technologically savvy as their counterparts

In a first-of-its-kind study, researchers at the University of Minnesota have discovered the educational benefits of social networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook. The same study found that low-income students are in many ways just as technologically proficient as their counterparts, going against what results from previous studies have suggested.

The study found that, of the students observed, 94 percent used the Internet, 82 percent go online at home and 77 percent had a profile on a social networking site. When asked what they learn from using social networking sites, the students listed technology skills as the top lesson, followed by creativity, being open to new or diverse views and communication skills.

Data were collected over six months this year from students, ages 16 to 18, in thirteen urban high schools in the Midwest. Beyond the surveyed students, a follow-up, randomly selected subset were asked questions about their Internet activity as they navigated MySpace, an online forum that provides users with e-mail, web communities and audio and video capabilities.

"What we found was that students using social networking sites are

actually practicing the kinds of 21st century skills we want them to develop to be successful today," said Christine Greenhow, a learning technologies researcher in the university's College of Education and Human Development and principal investigator of the study. "Students are developing a positive attitude towards using technology systems, editing and customizing content and thinking about online design and layout. They're also sharing creative original work like poetry and film and practicing safe and responsible use of information and technology. The Web sites offer tremendous educational potential."

Greenhow said that the study's results, while proving that social networking sites offer more than just social fulfillment or professional networking, also have implications for educators, who now have a vast opportunity to support what students are learning on the Web sites.

"Now that we know what skills students are learning and what experiences they're being exposed to, we can help foster and extend those skills," said Greenhow. "As educators, we always want to know where our students are coming from and what they're interested in so we can build on that in our teaching. By understanding how students may be positively using these networking technologies in their daily lives and where the as yet unrecognized educational opportunities are, we can help make schools even more relevant, connected and meaningful to kids."

Interestingly, researchers found that very few students in the study were actually aware of the academic and professional networking opportunities that the Web sites provide. Making this opportunity more known to students, Greenhow said, is just one way that educators can work with students and their experiences on social networking sites.

The study also goes against previous research from Pew in 2005 that suggests a "digital divide" where low-income students are technologically impoverished. That study found that Internet usage of teenagers from

families earning \$30,000 or below was limited to 73 percent, which is 21 percentage points below what the U of M research shows.

The students participating in the U of M study were from families whose incomes were at or below the county median income (at or below \$25,000) and were taking part in an after school program, Admission Possible, aimed at improving college access for low-income youth.

Greenhow suggests that educators can help students realize even more benefits from their social network site use by working to deepen students' still emerging ideas about what it means to be a good digital citizen and leader online.

To watch a video about the study and a full interview with the lead researcher, visit:

http://www1.umn.edu/urelate/newsservice/Multimedia_Videos/social_network.htm

Source: University of Minnesota

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