FATE IN REVIEW FOUNDATIONS IN ART: THEORY AND EDUCATION
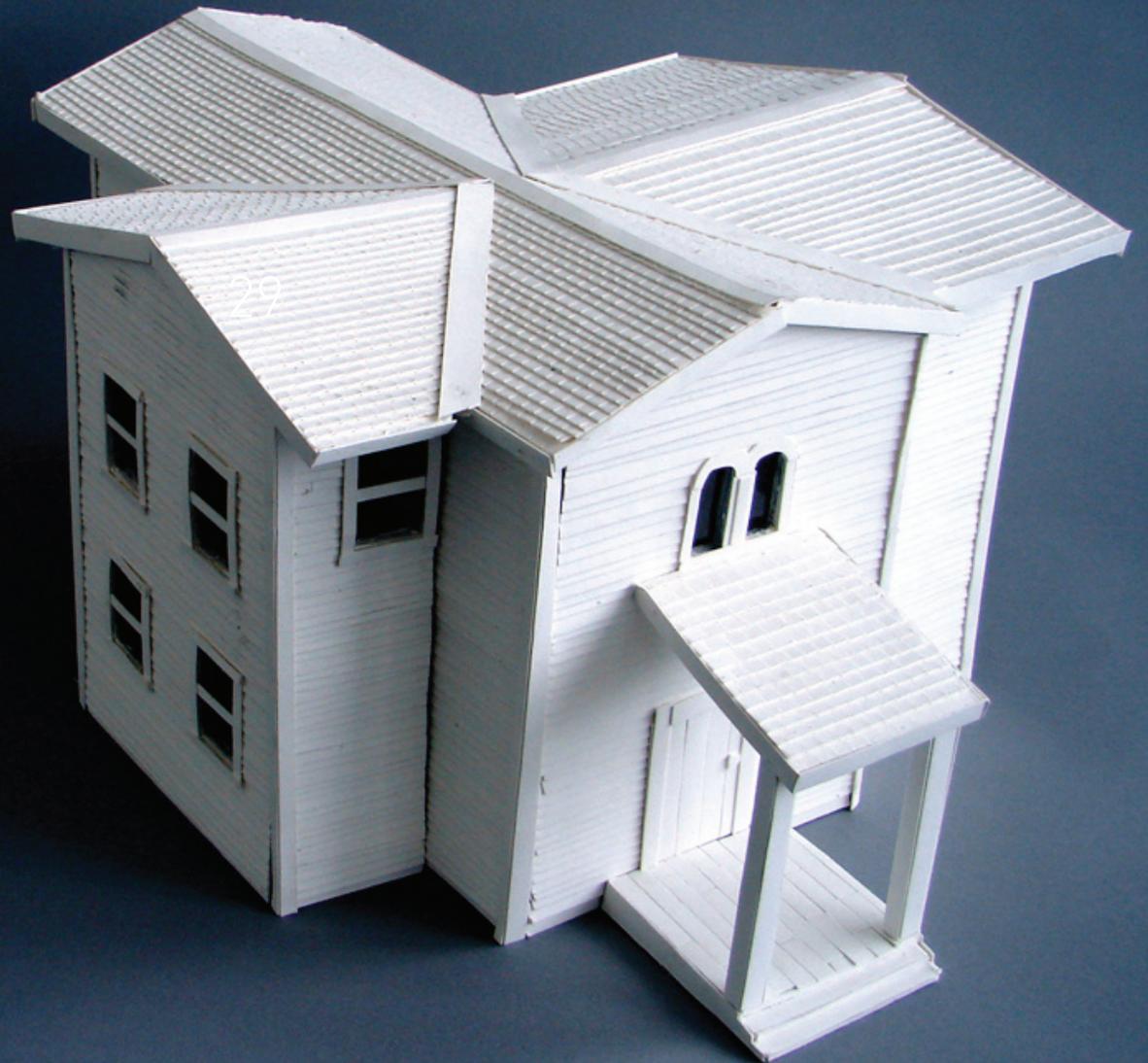
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Social Networking for Learning Communities: Using e-portfolios, blogs, wikis, pod-casts, and other internet based tools in the foundation art studio

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Welcome.

Welcome to a brand new day...a new way of getting things done.

Welcome to a place where maps are rewritten and remote villages are included.

A place where body language is business language.

Where people subscribe to people, not magazines...

And the team you follow, now, follows you.

Welcome to a place where books rewrite themselves

Where you can drag and drop people wherever they want to go...

And a phone doubles as a train ticket, plane ticket, or a lift ticket...

Welcome to a place where a wedding is captured...and recaptured...again and again...

Where home video is experienced everywhere at once.

Where a library travels across the world,

Where businesses are born,

Countries are transformed,

And we are more powerful together

than we ever could be apart.

Welcome to the Human Network.

—Cisco Advertisement for networking services used by Adam Kallish at the start of his presentation.

Social Networking enables people to use computers to exchange information and collaborate through computer-mediated communication. Social networking has evolved beyond the simple exchange of messages to the creation of online communities—including educational set-tings. It is an electronic space that both parallels and offers alternatives to 'real life.'

Increasingly, educators and their students use social networking to propel themselves into interactions that extend well beyond the con-straints of the physical studio classroom. The spatial and temporal dimensions of the educational enterprise can be transformed to meet changing pedagogical goals and provide for an expanded range of interactions. The tools for teaching, no longer a finite set of resources in a static physical plane, have become dynamic. The actors in this emergent space—teachers, students, and other staff members—are also presented with new opportunities and challenges. Instant messages, chat groups, role-playing video games, remote robotic links,

and the like depend on a virtual body or presence that 'stands in' for our disembodied selves. For some, this is a welcome relief from the numbing boredom of Real Life (RL). For others, social networking software frames a protected 'free space'—a level playing field—in which participants construct alternate identities not subjected to the inequities and abuses of the physical world. For an increasing number of educators and students, this alternative space—while hardly utopian—holds potential for the formation of virtual communities[1] that can extend and amplify the traditional classroom.

Broadly conceived, social networking encompasses older media such as mailing lists and Usenet, but has more recently come to be associated with software genres such as blogs, wikis, and podcasts. Social networking does not refer to a single type of software or simply sending messages, but to the use of one or more modes of computer-mediated communication to build linkages between individuals and foster the development of intentional communties. In this manner, people connect and build relationships by utilizing one-to-one (e.g., email and instant messaging), one-to-many (web pages and blogs), and/or many-to-many (wikis) communication modes. A good deal of online communities choose to continue face-to-face meetings as an integral part of the community building strategy.

Most forms of social networking facilitate 'bottom-up' or 'participatory' community development in which membership is voluntary, trust is essential, and the character and direction of the community is defined by the members themselves. Communities formed by participatory processes are different in kind and spirit to externally imposed working relationships or teams facilitated by 'top-down' software in which users' roles are predefined and access, control, and mission are determined by an authority outside of the community.

In the foundation art studio, these new technologies have considerable potential for supporting a new classroom culture in which students are challenged to become 'active learners' and the traditional role of the instructor has evolved to support a different classroom dynamic. Social networking can be used to promote better peer-to-peer interaction, to facilitate collaborative problem solving (e.g., PSEs—'problem solving environments); to provide an electronic record (e.g., e-portfolios in web format); to reach out to audiences and communities beyond the immediate art classroom; and to facilitate and document concept and design processes. We are already seeing experimentation by foundation teachers currently utilizing one or more social networking technologies in their art teaching and laying the groundwork for a critical debate regarding the creative uses (and abuses) of social networking.

Social Networking, while not without certain unfortunate manifestations, favors non-hierarchical, extra-curricular, custom-tailored approaches to teaching. Social networking is non-linear, multi-modal, and collaborative by nature. At its best, it is also participatory, customizable, and enables 'the right material, at the right time, at the right place, and in the exact amount.' It has a global reach and operates 24/7, extending the traditional classroom both spatially and temporally. Used as an alternative communication mode or as a supplement to the traditional classroom, it can empower individuals and facilitate community formation.

Social Networking: Guiding Questions

How do you prepare for the inevitable changes in the culture of the classroom/studio resulting from the introduction of social network-ing? In determining what technologies may best serve a particular curriculum and group of students, art foundations educators need to consider the following questions:

• What social networking technologies will best serve your goals as an educator?
• What kinds of interactions are desired—student to network, peer to peer, student to teacher, classroom to classroom?
• How will the 'times' (schedules) and 'spaces' (classrooms) for teaching shift and evolve?
• Is a code of conduct or 'netiquette' needed in this new expanded classroom/studio?
• What new pedagogical dynamics are served?
• How are the needs of your students addressed?
• How can you find a 'fit' between social networking and your own approach to foundation art teaching?

You may be asking, 'Why change at all?' The primary reason for considering the use of these new technologies is not the needs of teachers, but the changing characteristics of students. Success in the studio classroom in the 21st century may pivot on the ability to match technologies, delivery styles, and pedagogical methods to what some have characterized as the 'millennial student.'

Characteristics of the Millennial Student

It is pointless to entertain the use of Social Networking without a consideration of the students who are most impacted. Today's art foundation students are inherently defined by complete immersion and fluid integration with technology. Born between 1980 and 2000, these students' integrated lifestyles shape their efficiency at multi-tasking but weaken their ability to concentrate on one subject for a sustained period of time (Tucker, 2006). Since many art studio/foundations courses are two to three hours, which meet two to three times a week, this poses a potential problem when the attention span of a foundational student from the millennial generation is extremely brief and relies on instant gratification. Therefore, to successfully reach these students in an art studio course, instructors must first understand the characteristics of a millennial student and second structure their courses to mirror the technology students are using.

Millenials have a constant need for connectedness and satisfy this need through text and instant messaging, emailing, blogging, using chat rooms, web surfing, and podcasting. This constant immersion outside the classroom adds to their strong desire to be socially connected in the classroom and in collaboration with others (Tucker, 2006). Millenials expect these social connections to be instantaneous and feel disconnected when it is not. Therefore, they turn to other social communication tools such as instant messaging, facebook.com, myspace.com, text messaging, blogs, and others where they are assured of instant gratification. Millenials are skilled in the ability to multi-task since they are constantly connected. This has many positive connections to the studio classroom; however, multi-tasking also leads to attention-related issues (Tucker, 2006).

As one of the most protected generations in history, millenials are recognized as respected members of their family structure and have been involved in family decision-making since they were very young. This established role has a direct connection to their need to be socially connected and their expectations towards responsibilities and rights to be decision makers in the classroom and in cooperative group activities (Tucker, 2006). Related to their role in decision-making, millenials possess a sense of entitlement towards information, specifically how and what it is disseminated and why. Their strong need for recognition and respect adds to their sense of entitlement and influences their roles in challenging authority based on their assumed status (Raines, 2002).

Parents of millenials fostered the building of self-esteem in their children and as such millenials have strong expectations for respect and recognition of the work they do. Since they are such a protected generation in many ways they have been coddled and recognized for multiple achievements, no matter how small. Many millenials have been burdened with expectations that have started early in life and therefore work at a level that focuses on achievement and their measurement to it no matter how warped this level of achievement has manifested itself (Raines, 2002). This poses a potential threat when they enter a studio course and must deal with the constant constructive criticism of their work and their abilities when they have received directly the opposite in their prior experiences (Raines, 2002).

In their formal education prior to college, millenials have been educated in the new learning paradigm and are comfortable working in groups and possess an understanding of the cooperative learning process such as individual accountability, positive interdependence, face-to-face interaction and group processing (Johnson et. al, 1998). This can have a positive impact on activities like critiques and group presentations.

The profound differences between millenials and their 'pre-digital' parents and instructors point less to a 'digital divide' than a 'social divide' between faculty and students. There is little precedent in student social networking behaviors. With over 1,500,000,000 cell phones worldwide and over 100,000,000 iPods and millions of additional devices that have internet protocol (IP) capability, we are moving into an age of being constantly available.

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The internet and pervasive computing have allowed people to connect in real time (synchronous) wherever they are. For today's students who have grown up with cell phones, iPods, and laptops, using technology to sustain social relationships is second nature. For faculty who came from television and traditional telephony models, the contemporary landscape feels obsessive and even hedonistic. The question facing *educators* is how to redefine 'classroom' from traditional contact time, to using digital technology to extend the classroom throughout the week—and reconnect in a meaningful way with students. The question facing *students* is how to move past the entertainment model that is driving many of these social networking technologies and link it to critical thinking and pedagogical goals and objectives.

As the tools, spaces, and rigid schedules that characterize the traditional foundation studio shift and evolve, there is a need for a more robust conceptual framework to help us understand how to structure and evaluate the experiences of both educators and students. The construct of 'transactional experiences' is useful in understanding the needs of two or more parties and how they interact to complete a specific goal.

Transactional Experiences and Strategies for Success

Transactional experiences focus on defined narratives that take into account the needs of two or more parties and their ability to interact to complete a specific goal. This includes feelings, behaviors, time-space, and the exchanged value that is a result of a transaction. The goal is to minimize interference with the task at hand and maximize interactions to expedite completion. With the introduction of social networking, the variables become multiplied. Some of the challenges—and examples of *strategies*—include:

- Forming a defined narrative that takes into account the needs of faculty to class, faculty to student, and student to student. When faculty members develop a course, they will need to clearly define the three interaction levels in relation to course content and specific assignments and how digital technology can support face-to-face interactions.

  Faculty who put their course on line can more effectively manage content and modify courses to meet changing needs. Feedback for the student can come in many forms—from email 'critiques' from faculty members to reviews from professional artists and critics and students at other institutions who can review student work in the form of online e-portfolios such as Flikr or Picasa. Student to student interaction may be facilitated by 'chat rooms' or 'discussion boards.'

- Defining students' ability to interact to complete a specific goal. Faculty must strive to create the right 'digital ecosystem' that can support daily and weekly interactions between the three interaction levels to achieve specific project or assignment goals.

  Students and faculty alike can interact outside of the traditional classroom. While this may seem like an intrusion on precious faculty time outside the classroom, important 'unsupervised' work can take place student to student in the form of collaborative problem solving (using PSE, 'problem solving environments'), building web sites, documenting the outcomes of 'team investigations,' or producing podcasts that are available for download by student-defined groups.

- Defining desired feelings, behaviors, and time-space factors that influence the culture of the classroom. The most important aspect is clearly defining the culture of the classroom and learning. This means articulating acceptable and unacceptable behaviors and the appropriate use of virtual and physical interactions.

  As the boundaries between social networking phenomena such as MySpace and Facebook and the demands of the professional world evaporate (employers now routinely read MySpace profiles), students need to understand that what is appropriate in the real world may also define appropriate behavior in the virtual world.

- Defining the exchanged value that is a result of these transactions. These are the desired benefits that enhance the learning

experience as well as moving specific assignments forward to successful completion. This is how students and faculty will evaluate how successful a particular assignment or the course in general was to them.

Most educators are aware of the benefits of 'rubrics' for defining goals and placing the responsibility for success with the student. Such strategies can be shared online. Templates outlining specific tasks, clear timelines, and hyperlinked resources maximize the chances for follow-through and success.

• Reduce the interference with the task at hand. This important aspect defines the behaviors and resource misappropriation that gets in the way of reaching course goals.

Reducing interference could mean a restructuring of the physical classroom to more carefully frame discrete learning opportunities. Examples include desks with 'disappearing' monitors that fold away out of sight, dedicated collaboration 'pods' for team projects, shorter focused activities with clear outcomes, and rules for interaction defined by the community of users (such as no cell phones during group critiques).

• Maximize interactions to expedite completion. This important aspect defines the behaviors and resources that achieve reaching course goals.

Moving to a 24/7 calendar means that interactions need not be limited by the physical constraints imposed by the classroom and schedules. It also means that interactions can occur with individuals outside of the classroom more efficiently. Posting a student project to YouTube may yield unexpected feedback that can stimulate in-class discussion.

Faculty will need to modify their views on classrooms as a room at a specific time in order to distribute responsibilities to a small group of students who can interface with the rest of the class in maintaining the flow of the class throughout the semester. This group should be based on both meritocracy and interpersonal skills to facilitate teacher/student interactions. Faculty may also need the help of instructional designers who focus on linking educational goals and course content with the use of media technology.

This means that the classroom will become more dynamic and improvisational, built around specific repeatable goals. Faculty will need to become more flexible in scheduling their contact and planning time and thin-slicing them over the week to be more efficient. Students will need to become more disciplined and focused in having classroom responsibilities and maintaining classroom activities and performance, prepping them for their future work environments.

Relevant transactions mean that two parties concede certain things in order to complete the transaction. Usually this means that each party has to convince or cater to the other party something of value in order to make the transaction happen. Both faculty and students will need to learn about each others' needs and values in order to concede something that creates greater value for both parties.

In many ways, what is being proposed is unprecedented in contemporary education, yet this has been philosophically desired for centuries. Students and faculty now need to collaborate to run a course and fill it with relevant interactions. Social networking—in combination with an understanding of the 'transactional experiences' that these tools enable—have the potential, at minimum, to streamline the educational experience. They have the further potential of fundamentally altering the educational landscape by replacing 'top-down' approaches with 'participatory' and 'distributed' methods that maximize interaction and explode the time/space constraints of the traditional classroom. From a classical Sophist perspective, this new window reinforces a collaborative relationship for a class to explore important concepts and questions together.

There is no question that the uses of Social Networking outlined here need to be held against the darker realities of life in a hi-tech society.

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The insidious nature of surveillance and control, the assault on personal space and privacy, the commodification of aesthetic experience, and the ever-widening 'digital divide' between the technological haves and have-nots are constant reminders that technology is a double edged sword.

But there is at least an equal chance that a clearer understanding of the interactions enabled by Social Networking will yield a broader palette of choices from which educators and students (and others) can come together to create meaning. In taking an active role in the definition and use of these technologies, educators will surely find new models for learning and purposeful ways to make art.

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- Groupware: Yahoo Groups, PBwiki
- Instant Messaging: ICQ, AIM
- Servers for World Internet traffic: http://www.akamai.com/html/technology/visualizing_akamai.html
- Podcast: iTunes
- RSS: www.searchenginewatch.com
- Virtual Communities: Second Life: http://secondlife.com/; ActiveWorlds http://www.activeworlds.com

[1] The term *virtual community* is attributed to the book of the same title by Howard Rheingold, published in 1993. Rheingold pointed out the potential benefits for personal psychological well-being, as well as for society at large, of belonging to such a group. Virtual communities depend upon social interaction and exchange between users online. (See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Virtual_community).