

Communicating with online blogs: MySpace

Rob Darrow, Online Learning Specialist
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Parents, can you think back to when you were in high school? How did you communicate with your friends? Did you spend hours on the phone or arranging study meetings with friends? High school students today do the same thing except with the World Wide Web, there are many more ways to stay connected with friends.

High school students today are the first generation who grew up on the Internet and according to recent surveys and studies, 90 percent of teens go online every week for a variety of reasons (www.pewinternet.org), one of which is to post new thoughts or pictures to their online blog site or to respond to another person's posting.

Two of the most popular blog sites are MySpace (www.myspace.com) and Xanga (www.xanga.com). Online areas such as MySpace and Xanga allow individuals to journal, post pictures, post comments and have a chat area (see "MySpace Quick Facts" box).

MySpace has surpassed eBay,

Google and AOL in number of page views. MySpace receives more than twice the number of daily hits than Google. As of March 9, there were over 61,000,000 members. "MySpace is one of the hottest websites around. It's gaining 150,000 new members each day," (Times-Herald, New York, Feb. 12, 2006, www.recordonline.com.)

As I was researching information for this article, I went to Google News (news.google.com) and found that there had been 5,400 news articles written about MySpace across the United States in January and February 2006. Maybe you read the news article about the teen in New York, or the teen in Seattle or the teen in Bakersfield who met someone via MySpace, then agreed to meet them in person — and then the girls ended up being raped. Or perhaps you read the article about the middle school students in Costa Mesa who posted threats to their school and were suspended (Fresno Bee, March 3, 2006). This is the part of these online meeting places that is a concern to the safety of students, and specifically for students in Clovis Unified. Parents,

students, and educators should know how to be safe online (see "The Top 10 Safety Tips for Students and Parents").

In my position as the online learning specialist in Clovis Unified, I come in contact with the students who take the Cal Online high school courses. In trainings, they have shared thoughts about MySpace. Anyone in the world can search MySpace by putting in a search term. I put in the names of the high schools and intermediate schools in Clovis Unified and was surprised at how many students associated with Clovis Unified schools have accounts. I found that close to 5,000 current or recent Clovis graduates have MySpace accounts (see "MySpace Quick Facts" box).

Users can be connected in a variety of other ways such as by common book interests, a favorite band or by other interests. There is a feature in MySpace called "groups" that link together users with common interests and can be created by any member. To search the



This is one of more than 50 MySpace groups associated with Clovis schools. Any user in MySpace can create a group and become the group moderator. The group moderator can also make the group private, and only allow people designated by the moderator to access the group. This makes the users much more anonymous and hidden from others.

"groups" in MySpace or do other advanced searching, one has to become a member. With this ad-

vanced searching feature, I was able to see a number of groups associated with Clovis Unified schools. I found over 50 MySpace "groups" that link students together in Clovis Unified. Names of some of these groups are: Dry Creek Elementary, Hotties at Reyburn, ASI's Own Place, Kastner Rox, Clovis East High School, Clovis West Choir, Buchanan Alumni and Clovis High School Leadership.

Incidentally, searching and using MySpace or Xanga has to be done on a home computer because the District filter blocks these Web sites on the District network.

What can parents do?

First and foremost, parents should become knowledgeable about the popular online blog areas frequented by their children. Talk with your child and ask if he/she has a MySpace or Xanga account. Ask about the types of things he/she does in MySpace and look at your child's MySpace or other blog area (see "Parent Tips").

Why do students create MySpace profiles? I asked two different leadership classes — one at Clovis High and one at Buchanan High this question. These are the thoughts they shared:

■ "I use MySpace because it shows my personality. I can customize it with the layout I like, the songs I like and can write what I want. It's fun to share your favorite pictures with people without having to meet them in person."

■ "I don't have MySpace because I think it is kind of creepy. I mean, anyone can just look you up and look at your pictures."

■ "I use MySpace because it keeps me in touch with my friends and relatives who live in other cities and countries. It is fun to see pictures and comments from my brother, who is going to school in England, on a daily basis."

■ "On the other hand, it is kind of scary because sickos can copy the pictures on your MySpace page and put them on their page. A lot of girls put pictures of themselves half-naked and old nasty guys probably love MySpace for this."

■ "I like MySpace. It is a place for friends. It is a way to stay in touch with the people you know. So, students should just be safe and only talk online with the people you really know."

■ "I think it is a good idea for the school district to block Xanga and MySpace at school, because kids shouldn't be doing Xanga and MySpace at school!"

■ "I think it is important for students to be careful with what they provide to the public. I'm definitely going to think twice about the information I write on my MySpace."

■ "MySpace makes communicating with your friends so much easier. Instead of wasting time calling or money text messaging with your cell phone, we can just go on MySpace and chat with our friends."

■ "MySpace keeps me in contact with current and old friends from elementary school and those who have gone on to college."

■ "If someone you don't know sends you a message, you don't have to respond to the message. It is your choice to respond or not respond. Kids shouldn't be responding to people they don't know."

■ "Kids younger than age 13 should not have profiles in MySpace."

Since September, several Clovis Unified high schools have run articles about MySpace in their school newspapers.

The *Cougar's Growl*, the student newspaper from Clovis High, in their Feb. 3 edition had a front page article entitled "MySpace: new source of controversy in CUSD." Clovis High student reporter Megan Poindexter researched the article which was actually about students at Clovis West. These students "expressed concern as to if it is appropriate for schools to punish students based on what they may put on their MySpaces."

The important part for students and parents to realize is that if students create MySpaces or similar blogs and make them public, that they can be viewed by anyone

■ Please see *Blogs*, Page 9

"MySpace makes communicating with your friends so much easier. Instead of wasting time calling or money text messaging with your cell phone, we can just go on MySpace and chat with our friends."

Hey, high school students, do you have a MySpace account?

To High School Students in Clovis Unified:

How many friends do you have on your MySpace? If you are like the 4,705 other high school students in Clovis Unified who have MySpace profiles, you probably know the answer. How do I know there are this many Clovis students with MySpace accounts? I did a search in MySpace by high school and after clicking on the high school, the search showed how many students from each high school in Clovis put either Clovis High, Clovis West, Clovis East or Buchanan as their school.

In no time, I learned about a senior at BHS who loves to play baseball, golf with friends, go to the mountains and go to the beach to skimboard; a student at Clovis East who likes to skate and play the guitar; a student at CHS who likes to cheer, swim and shop; and a freshman at CWHS who is a Christian, plays basketball, volleyball and runs track.

I wonder if these students and others are concerned about how easy it is for a stranger to locate them?

I coordinate the online high school program in Clovis Unified School District and mostly interact with students via e-mail and through the online environment. Students have shared some of these thoughts during the online training we do with all online students. Many of these things are considered "common sense" to most of you, but are worth repeating:

I have learned some ways to become more anonymous on the Internet and in MySpace. If you have a MySpace (or Xanga) account:

- Don't use your real name or include your address or city.
- Don't respond to people you don't know.
- Don't agree to meet anyone in person who you meet online.

The goal is for you to be anonymous except to the people you know. Here are some ways you can be proactive online in order to remain anonymous:

- Remove any indication of the high school you attend.
- Make sure that you know all of the people on your 'friends list.' (If your parent asked who each person was, could you explain how you know them?)
- Be careful about the types of pictures you post and how you identify the people in the pictures. (Remember, unless you make your MySpace private, anyone in the world can view your pictures!)

If you don't like the results, then change your information to become more anonymous on the Web.

- Google your name and see how you are identified — try "your name and Myspace" in quotes.
- If you are concerned about any interaction online, share it with an adult.

You can do this by deleting your MySpace or other online account and then starting again.

I, along with other people in the school district, am concerned first and foremost for your safety. There have been students in Clovis Unified who have shared personal information and agreed to meet people they only know from the Internet. By meeting someone you only know from the Internet puts you in a dangerous situation. Luckily, no one from Clovis Unified has been hurt.

What are some things we can do together to keep you and all students in Clovis Unified safe on the Internet? The purpose of this letter is to bring these issues to your attention so that, hopefully, you will become more anonymous in MySpace and help your friends to be more anonymous, too. Also, I wanted to create a conversation about MySpace and Internet safety among the students, parents, teachers and school staffs in Clovis Unified.

Feel free to share your thoughts with me via email at: blogcomments@cusd.com or visit our Web site at www.clovisusd.k12.ca.us.

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