

Social Media Destroys Geography in Education

Social media opens the door for borderless education.

Post published by Pamela B Rutledge Ph.D., M.B.A. on Jun 24, 2009 in Positively Media

Let's face it, communication technologies are forcing us to become global citizens and think outside our own borders. Politicians may be full of rhetoric about the dangers of globalization, but technology isn't going away. It seems to me more productive to figure out how to flourish in the new environment than to stand in front of a steam roller. We might get the guy driving the steam roller to slow down, but it will cost a lot and it won't last for long.

In the Washington Post article *Students without Borders*, journalist Maria Glod writes about some positive examples of globalization through communication technologies. Social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, are connecting students around the world. The article and accompany chart are well worth a read to see how students in Washington DC area high schools are debating things like freedom of the press with their peers in Azerbaijan and Romania or collaborating on a science project growing maggots (I'm not making this up) with their counterparts in Singapore. When you're talking on Facebook, there is no such thing as geography.

This is cool for a number of reasons. First, the students have an opportunity to use media technologies in a positive way. This will expand their perception of how things like Facebook can be used. This kind of activity blurs the line between education and technology, allowing the technology to facilitate the educational process. If an excellent writer's words recede so we can experience a story, not 'hear' the author, so should good education and good use of media technologies recede so they do not interfere with content and learning experience. The kids from Washington DC aren't Facebooking. Facebook isn't even there. They are creating human connections and experiencing first hand the richness and nuances of other cultures and perspectives.

There are some economic advantages of integrating technology in education, too. Technology offers the possibility of world travel to every schoolchild with Internet access. I can't think of a more cost effective and pain-free way to get a group of teenagers to Romania. Not only do you save money, you don't have to sit next to them for 14 hours in coach.

Most importantly, however, these experiences influence our social identities. How we think about, or define, ourselves and how we define others is fundamental to how we relate to others. Our social sense of self comes from how we view ourselves relative to others. We negotiate through psychological and physical needs, desires, and allegiances to establish boundaries between 'us' and 'them'. From the immune system to *Project Runway*, we select who is 'in' our group by identifying who is 'out.' A large body of social science literature shows that a strong sense of group affiliation creates a strong sense of who is NOT part of our group. Remember junior high? Call it a mental model, a core belief, or a stereotype. It doesn't matter. Out is out. If you're out, you're not a person, you're an 'other.' Not surprisingly, a very strong sense of group affiliation is highly correlated with cognitive inflexibility and the predisposition to conflict in group relations, whether it's your department, your football team, or your country.

If we meet someone from Azerbaijan, we can redefine as a place where our new acquaintance, a real person, lives. This is especially important when we create connections between cultures that traditionally, geographically, and politically have little contact. Lack of information means our understanding is limited and simplistic—we have no choice but to stereotype. Personal experiences are the broadband of information transfer. They provide rich information and emotional texture that makes us think and challenges the stereotypes we hold. Without experiencing things ourselves, we build our models of 'how things are' based on the filtered information we receive from the environment (a nice way of saying from the media and our acquaintances). That information cannot help but be biased by the time it is edited, socially-adjusted, transmitted, and passed through someone else's metaphor bank.

Direct experiences add complexity to our social identity. Economist and philosopher Amartya Sen is one of many scholars who promotes the development and awareness of complexity in our identity on the premise that people who can see themselves as part of many groups are more tolerant of others. (See *Identity and Violence* (link is external).) In other words, if our kids have the chance to share an activity, an interest, a discussion, or even a joke with a peer from places like Romania, Azerbaijan, Iran or China, they will be increasing their propensity for tolerance by seeing those as countries full of real breathing, caring, working, playing humans and not an enemy or an 'other.' To me, that's a pretty good learning objective for an educational experience. And the kids may even want to know where Azerbaijan is on the map.