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Expanding Community: Youth, Social Networking, and Schools

Desarrollando la comunidad: jóvenes, redes sociales y escuelas

ABSTRACT

This study examined the construct of community and its development in online spaces through a qualitative analysis of middle school students' participation in a private social network. Drawing on notions of community inspired by philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, we found that students, despite not knowing one another previously, were willing both to encounter and come to know each other, using the resources of the network to build the trust that became foundational to their online social relationships. They did so primarily through two kinds of interactional effort that we call «public work» and «proximity work». Negotiating their positions relative to one another (proximity work) and across public/private spaces (public work), youth used a variety of semiotic tools to establish relationships and address the considerable challenges of digitally mediated communication with unknown others. This study suggests that educationally focused social networks can be designed for, or their uses primed toward, communicative purposes and activities foregrounding reciprocal exchange that is ethically alert and socially aware, and that schools and other educational institutions, though historically resistant to technological innovation, have an important role to play in this process.

RESUMEN

Inspiradas por las nociones de comunidad del filósofo Jean-Luc Nancy, nuestro estudio examina el concepto de comunidad y su desarrollo en entornos virtuales a través de un análisis cualitativo de la participación de alumnos de educación secundaria obligatoria (de 11 a 14 años de edad) en una red social privada. Nuestros datos indican que los alumnos, a pesar de no conocerse previamente, estaban dispuestos a conocerse y relacionarse, y a utilizar recursos de una red social privada para desarrollar la confianza necesaria para mantener sus amistades virtuales. Para lograrlo, los estudiantes usaron dos métodos de interrelación que llamamos «trabajo público» y «trabajo de proximidad». Al negociar sus posiciones relativas a los otros estudiantes (trabajo de proximidad) y a través de espacios públicos y privados (trabajo público), los jóvenes utilizaron diversos instrumentos semióticos para entablar amistad y para enfrentarse a los numerosos retos de la comunicación con desconocidos a través de medios digitales. Este estudio indica que las redes sociales educativas pueden ser diseñadas con fines comunicativos y para actividades que ponen de relieve los intercambios recíprocos que son éticamente y socialmente conscientes. Por último, los resultados sugieren que, aunque históricamente han demostrado una resistencia a la innovación tecnológica, las escuelas y otras instituciones educativas tienen un papel importante que desempeñar en este proceso.

KEYWORDS / PALABRAS CLAVE

Social networking, youth, community, digital media, new literacies, hospitality.
Redes sociales, jóvenes, comunidad, medios digitales, nuevas alfabetizaciones, hospitalidad.

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1. Introduction[1]

– Hannah: Hey
– Jay: Who the hell are u?
– Hannah: God u dnt hve to b mean!!!! :{
– Jay: Who are u what skool you go to?

In this chat exchange on a social network, two children who attended different middle schools in northern California (USA) met here for the first time as part of an after-school digital media program. Held twice weekly at five participating schools, these after-school classes were designed to help young people learn to communicate effectively and responsibly via a private social network with other young people they did not yet know. Despite 13-year-old Hannah's innocuous effort to reach out to a new person on the social network, 12-year-old Jay reacted suspiciously to being contacted by someone he did not know. As young people in our study communicated with unfamiliar peers, some of them, like Jay, were understandably cautious about interacting with «strangers». Hannah, however, helped to socialize Jay into conversational norms for talking with unfamiliar peers online; after she chastised him for being «mean», Jay softened his aggressive tone and asked questions that opened the conversational door (indeed, their exchange righted itself and continued for 44 turns). We have been interested in tracing the evolution of what came to be a vibrant online community of young people, particularly their efforts to negotiate how to be respectfully cautious as they learned to communicate with one another at once playfully, ethically, and critically.

Our research to illuminate how young people formed a nascent but lively online community in a relatively short period of time has challenged our expectations about the process of community-building in virtual spaces. We have, in fact, as we will discuss below, been led to reconsider the often-contested notion of «community» in relation to educational spaces. In its idealized form, community has traditionally signified a space of safety, connection, and communion. Yet many actual communities in our time and place stand in deep contrast, indexing danger, alienation, and disconnection. Parents of the children in our study worried, and not without reason, about keeping their children safe in real neighborhoods and virtual spaces. «Bad things can happen to little girls online», one child warned us, revealing an oft-heard wariness of digital spaces where strangers could lurk. In such a digital and dangerous world, what notions of community, of self in relation to others, do young people develop? And what responsibility might schools and other educational agencies assume to influence that process? Recent findings suggest that the potential for virtual communities to connect young people in new ways across school and out-of-school spaces is promising (Banaji & Buckingham, 2010; boyd, 2011; Poyntz, 2009). Yet we know little about how youthful online communities are constituted, develop, and operate – and to what extent educators might facilitate and nurture them. How do young people interact with one another to build communities across virtual and physical spaces, and what roles might there be for schools in this process?

As virtual communities challenge traditional definitions of community that rely on geography and physical proximity, we are interested in how digital networks and participatory cultures can help us reframe how we think about «belonging» and «proximity», two central concepts in literatures pertaining to community, the public sphere, and cosmopolitanism (Delanty, 2003; Hansen, 2010; Papacharissi, 2002). We are especially keen to understand how today's children and youth become socialized into understandings of self in relation to other, and the role of opportunities for virtual interaction in this process. Unparalleled challenges for youth around identity formation in fractured local spaces, not to mention the coming of age in a globalizing world, make such concerns especially acute. To theorize these issues we draw on the work of philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy (1991, 2000), especially his understanding of community as constituted by a fluid process of communication based on reciprocal recognition and exchange. According to Nancy, building community involves two dialectical processes: exposing and bridging distances. That is, individuals with different belief systems, experiences, and identities both appear before one another and engage in reciprocal interaction as they work to «be in common». The challenge, particularly for schools, is how to create opportunities for communication that provide the conditions for community to emerge. We suggest that educationally focused social networks offer considerable promise in this regard; that is, they can be designed for, or their uses primed toward, youth-driven communicative activities that foreground reciprocal exchange that is ethically alert and socially aware.

2. Community as Communication

As we become more connected to more people across wider distances –geographical and metaphorical– we face challenges in how to describe and theorize new social practices (Willson, 2010). The concept of «community» has a long history as a theoretical construct for exploring forms of sociality (Delanty,

2003), but it has been critiqued as too utopian, too totalizing, or too broad a term to be useful (Postill, 2008). In addition, traditional definitions of community in which locality and physical proximity are central have been challenged by the proliferation of «virtual communities» (Rheingold, 1993) that offer new ways to connect. Scholars exploring new kinds of relationality with mediated technologies have described these communities as «imagined» (Anderson, 1983) or «networked» (Castells, 1996), conjoined primarily by people's feelings of fellowship or joint participation. For our inquiry into one youth-driven social network, we have focused on a dimension of community that is common to most definitions, and that is the question of belonging, which essentially asks: in what ways are we connected with one another?

This question lies at the heart of the philosophy of Nancy (1991: 29), who argues that members of a community are not fused into one cohesive group –a «common being»– but rather occupy a state of «being in common». «Being» for Nancy is fundamentally social: existence is always coexistence; I is not prior to we. As a fundamentally human enterprise, being in a community is always «being in common», a fluid state that recognizes plurality and difference and that allows for «mutual interpellations». Engaging in a community does not then require a commitment to a set of common beliefs but does assume a willingness to associate with others, especially across differences.

Indeed, it is this understanding of community as fundamentally constituted by difference, and a willingness to communicate across difference, that we find particularly generative. Nancy (2000) describes our relationship with others as a kind of interlacing, in which strands remain separate even within the knot (p. 5). We are in proximity to one another but only insofar as the closeness between us makes manifest the distance. That is, it is impossible to come together as a common being (i.e., close the distance between us completely) because it is in the act of sharing the space between us that meaning is made. The distance between us is thus not a gap to be filled or a space to be closed but a recognition of ourselves in the other and the other in ourselves. This distance is communication: to communicate is to expose the «with», the shared, the between. And thus community is communication – the process of reciprocal interaction. It is actively created and continuously produced as people expose themselves (i.e., mutually appear) to one another.

If, as Nancy proposes, community is the active and fluid process of communication, then the new global forms of communication, afforded by mobile and digital technologies, offer potentials for «new ways of belonging» (Delanty, 2003: 151). In this article we explore one such way that belonging can be negotiated in digital contexts by looking at how youth constituted, co-constructed, and negotiated contexts through joint communicative effort. As contexts collapse in virtual spaces, people who do not share a context need to co-create it through their semiotic work (boyd, 2011; Haas, Carr & Takayoshi, 2011). With fewer material resources available, interlocutors in digitally mediated contexts like social networks must build referentiality into their interactions, creating shared networks of meaning that orient and ground participants in relation to one another. Thus, we looked at how a social network, as a space oriented to communication, afforded participants new opportunities for developing community; that is, the space provided multiple avenues for building shared viewpoints through the use of diverse semiotic tools.

We also attended closely to the challenges youth faced as they exposed and bridged the distances between them, for online communication is fraught with the potential for misunderstanding, particularly for young people who are just beginning to explore how to position themselves online in relation to diverse, interactive audiences.

In its idealized form, community has traditionally signified a space of safety, connection, and communion. Yet many actual communities in our time and place stand in deep contrast, indexing danger, alienation, and disconnection. Parents of the children in our study worried, and not without reason, about keeping their children safe in real neighborhoods and virtual spaces.

3. Data collection and analysis

In 2011, we worked with teachers, administrators, and staff members from five schools in contiguous urban neighborhoods in Northern California to design an eight-week digital and social media course for middle school students (ages 11-14). Within the after-school classes, young people created films that they shared and discussed on a private social network called S28[2]. Similar to other social networks, S28 allowed users to designate friends, post text and media on their profile pages, and communicate through a variety of functionalities (messages, chat, blogs). The curriculum of the class was designed around the notion of hospitality, which teachers helped students think about critically through concepts like friendship and media representation. In part because these classes were situated in private and parochial schools, many of which were characterized by a welcoming and inclusive ethos, students seemed to take to these concepts readily, even while teachers pushed them to do so critically and reflexively.

Located within the San Francisco Bay Area, the five schools shared several characteristics, including operating outside the public school system as a Catholic school or, in the case of one of the schools, as a public charter. Additionally, they each served students from low-income backgrounds who hailed from under-resourced neighborhoods. These students represented the diversity that is typical of many urban areas in the US, with more recent immigrants from Latin America and parts of Asia living alongside long-standing African American populations. The schools themselves, though linked through religious affiliation and/or participation in the consortium that was made possible by 21st Century funding, differed from one another in terms of school cultures and the ethnicities of their particular student populations. The youthful participants in this study faced additional challenges beyond those that typically accompany adolescence – namely, situating themselves within a nation that has historically marginalized many minorities and that has been unsuccessful in closing achievement gaps between white and certain Asian students and all the rest. Closing those gaps provided the impetus for the 21st Century program, and giving the youth access to technological tools, skills, and practices was one means of doing so.

Across the five schools, we worked with 59 participants over three months, collecting a wide variety of qualitative and quantitative data. For this study, we began by analyzing all material posted on the social network, which was available via a detailed and customized tracking system that archived all online content. From these analytics, we created a set of matrices (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to illuminate participation patterns across youth and across time. Employing the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), we looked across the various functions of the site and examined how young people engaged in different activities online. In addition to the online data, we analyzed data collected in the after-school classes, including pre- and post-surveys, field notes, teacher memos, video- and audio-recordings of the sessions, creative materials (e.g., storyboards, drawings), and participant pre- and post-interviews. In this article, we focus on a subset of the data, the public and private postings and messages on the social network. We present excerpts and quotations from students' work in their original form, which included texting conventions, IM language, popular cultural references, and slang. Children were not discouraged from communicating in these ways or admonished to use standard forms of English. They were, in fact, free to communicate however they chose, and their communicative choices and conundrums on occasion served in their after-school classes as generative contexts for discussions about language use.

4. «Being in Common»: Young people's efforts to know each other

Despite some initial cautiousness about talking to unfamiliar peers, youth embraced the S28 social network and quickly became avid contributors in the networked space. All 59 participants created an online public presence by designing their personal profile pages and posting images, text, and music in various combinations to an individual page that could be viewed by other members of the network. We interpret these efforts to craft a presence in the networked space to be the adoption of a stance of openness toward others (Hull, Stornaiuolo & Sterponi, in press), a willingness to reveal something about themselves and make a visible mark in the fledgling community. Young people explained that their willingness to reveal themselves was connected to feeling «safer» participating in a space in which a limited number of participants could view their online efforts. While they could publicly participate in the S28 network by posting information about themselves for other members to see, the «privately public» (Lange, 2008) nature of S28 offered them the opportunity to do so surrounded by peers enrolled in the same program and engaged in the same kinds of activities. Furthermore, adults monitored the network, contributing to the «safe» feeling while

also influencing how young people engaged online. As youth communicated with one another more easily and regularly over time, building on the public personas they crafted, they developed trust – an important component for initiating and deepening relationships with one another that in turn constituted the foundation of their emergent community.

4.1. Openness to Encountering Others: A Dimension of Students' «Public Work»

In posting messages, photos, videos, and music across the network, all 59 young people left visible traces in the public areas of the network, in effect creating a public persona. They referenced favorite foods, pop culture icons, and fictional characters alongside personal and popular photos, videos, and music – all in an effort to craft an online identity visible to other members of the network. The act of participating in the public areas of the social network served to ground students in the space, locating them as active members of the community and allowing others to peruse their displays at will. We found that young people's «mutual exposure» (Nancy, 1991) to one another online –that is, their efforts to appear to each other in the S28 public arena– anchored them in the networked space in ways that proved important for forging new social relationships.

Young people participated publicly on the site across forum discussions, comments, media postings, blogs, and youth-created interest groups, but their greatest efforts (and most frequent postings) were expended on their personal profile pages. In one example of a young man's profile page (Figure 1), Sebastian, going by his chosen username «monster in the dark», represented himself with an avatar photo of the well-known cartoon character Woody Woodpecker and a decorative wallpaper background featuring the popular band Linkin Park.

By publicly articulating his popular cultural affiliations on his page, in what Liu (2008) has called a «taste performance», Sebastian established his presence as an active member of the networked community by offering personal information. He revealed more about his home life and his tastes by posting a short biography and writing regularly changing status messages. In these ways, Sebastian made himself «knowable» to others in the network. He gave others the opportunity to engage with him in the networked space by creating a public persona of a young man who liked popular music and soccer, loved his family, and watched cartoons and current movies – all potential conversational entry points for his audience. In attending so carefully to these public performances, young people seemed to signal an openness to others, helping others know more about them through self-revelation. Youth drew on these public displays as resources in learning about each other throughout the whole program – looking at them before reaching out for the first time, referencing them in conversations, and using them to establish common ground with unfamiliar interlocutors.

4.2. Negotiating Private Spaces: A Dimension of Students' «Public Work»

While the public areas proved important for displaying particular identities and stances –visible of course to many audiences, including familiar and unknown peers and adults– the private areas made possible different ways of coming to know one another. In these private domains, young people referenced the public personas that were important to establishing youthful presence, but they went beyond those identity statements to negotiating interpersonal relationships that formed the cornerstone of the new community. Chats and private messages, as dyadic spaces out of view of peers and teachers, offered synchronous and asynchronous opportunities for youth to negotiate relationships and learn about one another privately. Since students did not need to worry about others publicly viewing these conversations, we found that they took more

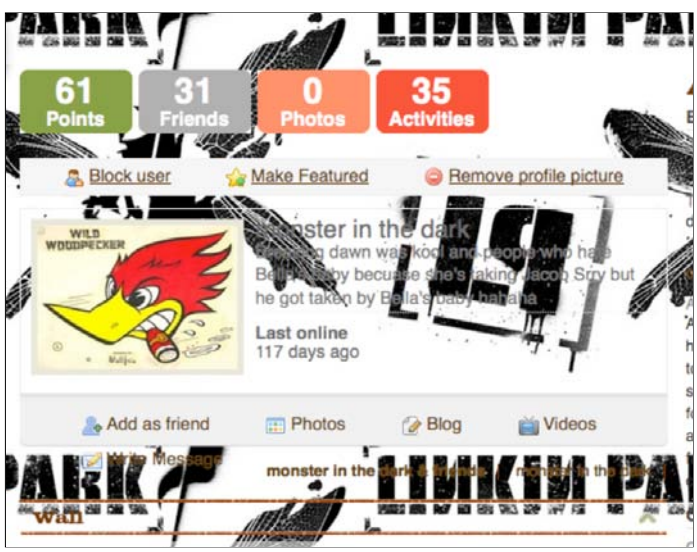

Figure 1. Sebastian's profile page.

risks than they did in the public domain. One young man Julio, for example, felt comfortable expressing his emotions to his online friend Isabel, writing, «I love you as a friend». While the public spaces offered young people the opportunity to play multimodally with performances of self, the private spaces provided needed opportunities to negotiate those relationships, sticky as that process might be at times, and take risks in sharing emotions and information with peers out of view of others.

We interpret these efforts to craft a presence in the networked space to be the adoption of a stance of openness toward others (Hull, Stornaiuolo & Sterponi, in press), a willingness to reveal something about themselves and make a visible mark in the fledgling community. Young people explained that their willingness to reveal themselves was connected to feeling «safer» participating in a space in which a limited number of participants could view their online efforts.

One of the most important ways that young people earned trust and deepened their relationships was to tell the «truth» about themselves, certainly a risky proposition online with others one did not know. Youth constantly evaluated whether others could be trusted, searching their profiles, talking to them online, and trying to figure out whether the information they provided was «authentic». Personal photos were often exchanged as a means to establish trust between members of the community, or to further extend an already-established connection. These exhibitions assumed heightened importance, operating as a form of «unveiling» in which users gradually divulged facets of personal information as a means to establish deeper relationships with other members of the community. After instigating a connection based on shared cultural contexts, users wanted to see the «real» person behind the avatar. For example, after chatting for 23 lines in the private space, Sofia asked Chris, «wht do u looke like? Who r u on the piks?» (referring to the class photos posted on the site), to which he responded, «Im 11 and the one next to the guy who points the finger». Personal photographs served as a primary means of making one's participation as a «real» person in the community visible, opening the door to and deepening burgeoning friendships.

Another way to further fortify these connections was to ask the interlocutor to reveal his or her «real» name. Users would often ask outright, as Michael did after chatting with Asha for 33 lines: «th4ts koo 4nd wh4ts ur n4m3». Other times young people would reveal their names when they felt they had established a rapport, as Julio and Arturo did after two months of interaction, when they faced the prospect of meeting face-to-face:

– Julio: Are your going to berkeley on this friday to se everyone whos in space 2 create because im going and my real name is [julio chavez].

– Arturo: Yes and my name is [Arturo Flores] or u can call me [Arty].

Often the request to reveal one's real name was part of a larger initiation process by which the youth verified that the user wasn't a «fake» friend. While the users' screen name, avatar and profile page allowed them to present a carefully crafted public face to the network, disclosing personal information such as a photograph or real name signified that the parties were willing to take off these masks, reveal a «truer» self, and thereby enact and establish trust.

Not all of the «truth-telling» was straightforward or uncomplicated, particularly for young people who were developing their sense of identity in a networked community. In one interchange that illustrates the complexity of this endeavor, Jay and Serena tried to «place» the other in terms of familiar identity categories, in this case gender:

– Jay: U a gurl right.
– Serena: Yewwwp.
– Jay: Yay i was right.
– Serena: Yeah ur a gurl too.
– Jay: No im not.
– Jay: Im a dude a dude.
– Serena: Oh ok.

After chatting for several lines, Jay thought he had figured out that Serena was a girl, a way of identifying

her «real» identity that helped him locate himself in relation to her. When she responded that she thought he was a girl as well, Jay affirmed emphatically that he was «a dude». These negotiations about what constituted one's «true self» served as warrants for future interaction, and they became foundational for building community.

4.3. «Proximity Work»: Youth situating themselves

While young people generally adopted an open stance toward others online, that did not obviate the challenges of participating in a mediated space, where they could not rely on embodied social cues to guide communication. One of the ways that youth managed these challenges was through «proximity work'—efforts to name and manage their relationships to one another in the mediated space. Whether by announcing to the networked community, «I am at home now», posting a photo of themselves at school with classmates, or uploading a video about their family life, students used a wide variety of strategies to situate themselves in relation to other people, texts, and contexts. By locating themselves in relation (to other people, to texts, to contexts), young people exposed the distances between themselves and others, revealing where they metaphorically stood in the networked community. They also used proximity work to negotiate and bridge those distances, collaboratively determining where they stood in relation to one another and attempting to mitigate that distance as they worked toward mutual understanding. Through joint effort, young people built shared meaning together – in turn building their relationships and providing a strong foundation for an emerging sense of community.

Much of the proximity work on the network took the form of negotiation, as young people worked together to build shared meaning. By negotiating meaning jointly, participants created a shared set of texts and common experiences on the network, a repertoire that served to bind members of the network together. One means of using this repertoire to build relationships was through the creation of inside jokes, humor shared only by members of the community. One such in-joke centered on the affinity towards eating fried chicken, which Isabel began by posting a background image of fried chicken, which caught on across the network as more and more users accessed the «fried-chicken» trope to build a sense of affiliation and community belonging. This sense of belonging was reinforced by inclusive language and references to shared experiences. For example, participants regularly used third person plural pronouns (we, us) to frame experiences as shared, and they often wrote «shout-outs» addressed to the community at large, like Virginia's compliment, written as a status message: «I enjoyed everyones videos last night they were great!». She referred to a shared experience, a film night that brought all participants together in person to screen their films, her message joining everyone in the networked space to remember it and convey «we're in this together».

Not all of the negotiation was smooth, however, and young people often had to work diligently to locate themselves in relation to one another in ways that would be «heard» and recognized. One means of addressing these difficulties was by posting and referring to personal photos and videos, which anchored students in the networked community, making visible their presence and providing a common touchstone. In the following example, Hannah and James negotiated a potential misunderstanding by using photos to close the distance between them:

– Hannah: Hey.
– James: Hey.
– James: Wat school u go 2.
– Hannah: [Name1].
– Hannah: Wht about u?
– James: [Name2] where all the hot boys are.
– Hannah: U thimk u hot?
– James: That not a pic of me its my friends.
– Hannah: R u sure abut tht?
– James: Yea for real.
– James: I hella hot and taken.
– Hannah: Sure wht eva cn i c a pik of u?
– James: So how about u u taken or not u probbly ugly.
– James: Wait im putting my photo.
– Hannah: Kk and no i am not ugly and i am not taken:}
– James: So tell me about u.
– Hannah: Ive to play soccer.

While the conversation began cordially enough, James' comment that he was located «where all the hot boys are» shifted the course of the conversation and invoked a teasing/flirting discourse. James continued his show of bravado, a marked departure from the discourse of cordiality on the network, by claiming he was «hella hot and taken» before insulting Hannah by saying she was «probbly ugly». Hannah, instead of taking umbrage at the insult or abandoning the conversation altogether, referred James to photos to challenge his assertions and expressed skepticism about his claims. Users like Hannah, who modeled how to situate themselves in the space in grounded ways, opened up possibilities for bridging distances (and leaving

open the possibility of questions like James, «so tell me about us»). The use of photos in this interchange helped Hannah and James' overcome potential misunderstandings and communicative missteps by relying on texts and contexts they built together.

5. The «Communication Work» of the S28 Community

Though young people in our study certainly encountered challenges in communicating with unfamiliar others, we continue to be struck by the fortitude, imagination, and creativity they displayed in their mutual efforts to learn about, from, and with one another. Our participants engaged in the key processes of community development suggested by Nancy: they remained open to knowing one another and they cooperatively worked to bridge distances between them. We found that youth did so by primarily engaging in two kinds of «communication work» in building relationships across differences – what we call «public work» and «proximity work».

In their «public work», youth negotiated the different publics of the networked space by adapting and shifting their rhetorical strategies across communal and private spaces. In the communal spaces of the network, students built public personas that served as communicative bridges to others, engaging in civil discourse there that bred good will and modeled site-appropriate behavior for one other. In the private spaces, young people adopted different communicative styles, taking more interpersonal risks in sharing personal information and challenging one another to reveal their «true» selves. In their «proximity work», participants located themselves in the mediated space in relation to others, in turn creating shared cultural contexts and forging common bonds. Through both their public and proximity work, youth engaged in the central labor of any community – exposing and bridging distances between people through communication. By putting themselves into the community, youth signaled they were open and willing to engage each other; by negotiating their positions in the community relative to one another, they dwelled in the spaces between them, learning about each other and themselves in the process. This, as Nancy says, is «being in common», recognizing ourselves in the other and the other in ourselves.

We do not mean to suggest that these efforts were uncomplicated. Certainly one must only look to the increasingly divisive discourses that separate us from one another to know that building community and communicating across differences are daunting. Introna and Brigham (2007) argue that the central ethical burden of community is hospitality (Silverstone, 2007), which must be invented and negotiated at every turn. This study illustrates that educationally-focused social networks like S28 offer multiple avenues for young people to engage in hospitable practices, make mistakes and work through them, and develop capacities to be «response-able» communicators in a global world – all the while being supported by an educational framework. The need for an ethically-attuned educational framework is particularly pressing as more communities face troubling challenges and deep cultural and social divisions. These are further compounded by the new responsibilities and challenges that digitally-mediated communication brings to the fore. Unfortunately, even though the majority of US schools now have access to digital technologies that have the potential to connect people in new ways, there remains a wide disparity between the rich learning opportunities that these technologies afford and the constrained technology practices prevalent in many schools (Cuban, 2001). This disparity is even starker in terms of schools incorporating «Web 2.0» technologies like social networking, which are often banned or viewed as tangential to instruction and learning (Hutchison & Reinking, 2011).

As this study indicates, however, educational institutions have an important role to play in fostering the kinds of hospitable practices that allow community to flourish. In particular, educationally-focused social networks, with their emphasis on co-constructed, collaborative meaning making with a variety of semiotic tools, can be a generative means of supporting important 21st century communication skills. As we have illustrated, perhaps some of the most salient capacities that educators can now help foster are young people's dispositions to be thoughtful, critical, and hospitable interlocutors, willing to «be in common» with others who may seem quite different from and alien to themselves, despite living in contiguous communities and sharing a national identity and a range of affinities and affiliations. Using a repertoire of semiotic tools, participants on social networks can negotiate multiple spaces and mediated distances through their public and proximity work, building relations in a world in which our capacities to interact and to build connections can seem at times remarkably tenuous – though never more important.

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Notes

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2 Students used a private partition of the social network Space2Cre8 (www.space2cre8.com), a platform we developed as part of a three-year design research project with young people from around the world, funded primarily by the Spencer Foundation.

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