Introduction

Many readers worldwide were startled by Time magazine’s choice of its 1982 “Person of the Year,” a recognition given to that individual who “for better or worse has done the most to influence the event of the year.” In that year – the same year that the AIDS was given its name, that Yuri Andropov succeeded Leonid Brezhnev after leading the Soviet Union for eighteen years, the cover of the magazine was adorned with the personal computer. In its article on the subject, Time cited Seymore Papert, professor of mathematics and education at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, who said, “Computers help teach kids to think. Beyond that, they motivate people to think. There is a great difference between intelligence and manipulative capacity. Computers help us to realize that difference.”

In many respects, Time was more than prescient in its choice: in 1982 only 2.8 million personal computers were sold in the US; today over 75 million were sold just in the United States, and in American schools and universities, over 30 million computers assist teachers in their daily task of educating a nation. Indeed, it is now estimated that over one billion computers are in use all over the world.

This explosion in the number of computers in everyday use around the world has created, as many predicted, a quite vibrant and interesting cyberworld, which like some
parallel universe coexists in our material world as separate plane of existence for many of its users, among them our students. Most significant in the growth in the participation of students in cyberspace are the social networks, which now exist in virtually any country that has computers in wide use. Begun as a seemingly innocuous – and free – way to stay in immediate touch with friends, chat programs such as AOL Instant Messaging, iChat, and Messenger soon gave way to the birth of newer more sophisticated ways of socializing. The first and now most widely used of these, Facebook, began at Harvard University as Facemash in 2003, as an extension of the university newspaper’s “What’s Hot? What’s Not” section. Today, Facebook -- or its imitators such as “V Kontakte” and “Odnoklassniki” in Russia – now has over 400 million users worldwide.

With the recent explosion of social networking sites, including LiveJournal, MySpace, YouTube, LinkedIn, Bebo, and SixDegrees, it no wonder that a 2007 study of the National School Boards Association showed that school age children were spending nine to twelve hours a week on social networking sites – about as much time as they spent watching TV. Significantly, that number increases to fifteen to twenty hours per week for university students, according to the Chronicle of Higher Education, nearly twice the average time per week spent studying for classes.

As the authors of a current book on the subject, Online Social Networking on Campuses Understanding What Matters in Student Culture, Ana Martinez Aleman and Katherine Wartman contend, “Higher Education professionals should recognize that online social networking sites like Facebook are part of a larger generational development in computer mediate communication that epitomizes most students on our campuses today. College students use these sites to engage socially in a manner that is
not conceptualized as ‘virtual’ and thus not ‘real’, but rather as a digital exchange of cultural norms and their transgressions broadly conceived.” Such a claim is crucial to understanding both the extent to which students are willing to reveal things about themselves and their lives to an open, mostly unmoderated, cyberspace that the entire world can access, and the amount of time they are willing to devote to these activities as part of their daily lives. Given that the SNSs have quickly become multimedia venues on which users can add text, photos, sound, and even video or live video, it was only a matter of time before the use of these site would become the leading means of student interaction on and off campus.

The use of these SNSs worldwide cannot be underestimated in the larger picture of world culture and current events. The recent US election of Barack Obama, as well of many other political figures in Congress and local governments, was facilitated in large part by social networks such as Facebook and Twitter to inform, persuade, and mobilize large numbers of American voters to the polls in November of last year. And who can forget the striking images of protests in Iran last year, organized and conducted remotely on SNSs that facilitated both widespread reach, and anonymity.

There is no question that in the globalized world of the 21st century, the need to feel and be connected seems to have risen to the fore of world consciousness. In the US, there was certainly a spike in this sentiment following the attacks of 9/11, in which millions of lives, literally, were at stake from all around the world and the need to be in communication became of paramount importance. However, between the ubiquitous use of cellular telephones and the Internet, it seems that SNS use in the last five years has taken on a somewhat different importance. No longer merely a means of being in touch,
SNS now replaces much of social interaction that was previously the domain of face-to-face contact in our cultures. The act of “hooking up” online has become shorthand for the larger world of “cyberdating” in our university culture. Further, some students have taken online dating to the next extreme of soft-core pornography through posting inappropriate photographs or other materials, and through “sexting,” the sending of instant messages with imbedded provocative photographs.

This appearance of such inappropriate materials on SNSs has become a feature of university cyber culture of the 2000s, so much so that some universities, such as the American University in Washington, DC, have added dedicated websites to combat the inappropriate use of SNSs or illegal or improper purposes. Further, since many legitimate future employers and educational providers also now turn to SNSs to get a more complete profile of a potential employee or student, American University gives its students advice on how to “de-tag” personal pages on SNSs.

Still, many educators are concerned that the skyrocketing rise in use of the SNSs of its university students will lead to a proportionate drop in academic performance. Indeed, Aryn Karpinsky of Ohio State University conducted a study that suggests who used Facebook on a regular basis had overall lower grade point averages than those who did not. Further, the study concluded that overall academic performance was lower for over half of the students surveyed. Some students in the survey actually used the term “addiction” to describe their relationship to Facebook in their daily lives.

But interestingly, experts in the area of SNSs use and education, such as Aleman and Wartman, indicate that “SNS will become an instructional tool soon. Facebook has already partnered with a course management system; some faculty have begun to use
Facebook groups to foster peer learning, conduct group projects, etc.” Certainly, this view is supported by the growing trend in the US educational culture to incorporate into their courses management systems, such as Blackboard, WebCT, Virtual-U and Learning Space, to deliver materials from course syllabi to lecture notes, to keeping attendance records and handling student communications. In fact, SSNs have already begun to be incorporated into our university courses at all levels.

My own adventure in attempting to turn unstoppable tide of our students’ incessant use of social networking technology – even during class – came out of a conversation with another foreign language colleague of mine, who was commiserating with me over the growing lack of students’ attention in our larger classes due to the use of the Internet during class. In particular we were deriding the relative newcomer to the social networking family: Twitter. While we both joked that any format that reduced conversation to utterances of only 140 characters signaled the demise of Western civilization, my colleague half seriously suggested that the only way we might ever change the culture of the new American classroom was to being to use this kind of technology as part of our instruction. As we both laughed at this suggestion, I suddenly wondered aloud, “Why not? My colleague countered with, “You could use it during your lectures to see what students are thinking!” Suddenly, the ludicrous idea became a pedagogical challenge: Could it actually work??

That semester, I was halfway through the semester of teaching a large course on science fiction in Russian literature and film to a group of eighty undergraduates. I approached them with the idea by asking who many of them used Twitter. About half of the class answered affirmatively. When I asked how many used their computer to send
IM during class, nearly all raised their hands. I asked if they would like to participate in an experiment in using Twitter during class as a way of commenting on the content and asking questions; virtually every hand went up. For the next class, I set up a Twitter account for the class, and began. The basic rules were simple: No profanity, and no attacks on other students or their comments. Students could comment on any part of the lecture: the lecture itself, the slides, the film clips, or the music used in the course. The auditorium was equipped with two projection screens, so I dedicated one of them to the Twitter page so that students could each other’s comments in real time. And then we began.

The lecture was on Tarkovsky’s *Stalker* and the Strugatsky Brothers’ “Roadside Picnic” which inspired it. I preceded the lecture with a short clip from the film in which the main characters enter the Zone. Immediately comments began to appear on the Twitter site, which I could read in the dark. “Creepy. Reminds me of Mad Max.” “Doesn’t the Zone mean something in Russian?” “Why doesn’t anyone shave in these movies?” “It’s more depressing than Mad Max, more like Solzhenytsyn.” “What’s up with the blue filter the director’s using??” And so they went.

By the end of the four-minute clip, I was ready to start my lecture, but I had in front of me a strange new kind of entry to the material. Not was I able to say what was in my lecture notes, but I could adjust my comments to respond to the students’ postings. As expected, some were meant only to be funny, others off the mark; but the majority of comments were germane and interesting commentaries/questions on the film, many of which would never have been expressed in the usual way of asking the ubiquitous “Questions?”
The comments the students made carried a great deal of substance and served as content organizers for my lectures. I honestly can say that I never really changed the basic content or message of my lectures, but found that I was able to craft them in to tailor-maid disquisitions that fit the general associations that the class was bringing to the topic.

I used the same technique throughout the entirety of my larger 150 person course on the vampire myth in Slavic culture, which is actually more of an introduction to civilization, religion, history, literature, and film on the topic. In this class, in spite of the significantly larger size, student used the Twitter site with great frequency and enthusiasm. While such attempts to use SNSs in a truly academic setting may appear to be purely acquiescent – giving in to popular student habits of their social culture, I contend that these efforts to use social networking media may be the best way to win back the integrity of our lecture halls. As Aleman and Wortman state, “Though not social online media, online course technologies add another dimension to students’ online habits and customs, and explicitly inject faculty into online interactions with students.” I concur with this assertion and would further add that without such engagement with our students’ culture, we may lose the ability to teach effectively.

I will end, however, on a positive note: As educators and faculty increasingly begin to understand the potential educational applications of social networking sites and other online resources to enhance their teaching and research, I believe that we can actually being to change the student culture of using these sites for purely social purposes. By appropriating even a portion of the twenty hours a week that students spend online for academic applications, we may actually have the ability to impact if
not change completely the culture of students using online services. Given that it is unlikely for students to tire of or discontinue the extensive use of SNSs during their college days, its now up to us to enjoin the battle on the same field. We must look at these computer sites not as competitors for our students’ time and attention, but rather as allies in our efforts to educate them in increasingly difficult circumstances.

If we return to that prophetic image of the computer as the “person of the year,” we should take comfort in knowing that the impact of computer technology far exceeded the expectations of the editors of Time magazine in the early ‘80s, but with the result of hastening the positive effects of globalization: making information and knowledge easily and cheaply accessible. More in line with Marshall McLuhan’s notion of mass media creating a “global village,” the explosion of social networking sites in the cyberworld of our students has certainly contributed to a new culture of student life in the US, a culture that we as educator must learn to use to our best advantage. Given that more than 80% of the users of the Internet reside outside of the US, this is issue not only for American educators but for everyone. The future of online social networking is occurring right now; we must decide where it will lead.