Published on *University of Colorado* (https://www.cu.edu)

Assessing and Addressing Students' Online Identities [1]

Professor Diane Sieber
Herbst Program for the Humanities
University of Colorado Boulder

Students entering college today maintain a range of online identities about which they have not yet learned to think critically. A recent large-scale national survey indicates that 44.8% of our students contribute content to video websites, 41.9% to wikis and 37.3% to blogs (ECAR 2009, 13). Fully 90.3% of these students use social networking services, with a median frequency of use of “daily.” An increasing number of students Twitter and status update for the public (Pew 2009). Clicker responses in my own classroom indicate that 9 out of 10 students (93.1%) google or social-network-search new friends, faculty, or potential dates, but only 13.6% routinely perform the same searches on themselves. Frequent media coverage of “facebook firings” and of job interviews undermined by candidates’ sketchy online identities indicates that online presence matters. Universities need to address this reality and determine how to educate students effectively in issues of privacy, security, and identity management.

Each semester at the beginning of my course HUEN 2843 The Meaning of Information Technology, I ask students to choose a partner and investigate him/her online. Armed with a 6-page search methods guide, students turn up a shocking amount of information, both flattering and damaging, about their peer partners. Reactions to the exercise are fascinating, as few students feel that the online identity they project is actually who they believe they are. Throughout the semester --as an extra activity-- we address this identity gap by activating privacy settings; sending take-down notices to MySpace, Facebook, Youtube, Flickr, etc.; by appealing to friends, and by intentionally constructing a more purposeful online identity.

Anecdotal evidence (FCQ and midsemester evaluation comments) suggests that students find this experience valuable, both as a course topic on relational databases and privacy issues, and as a milestone in their personal and social development. However, I don’t know this based on actual research, nor do I know that I am structuring the project optimally for all students. I want to get beyond “I tried it and I think it worked” to “I researched it and I understand how to optimize and publicize it.” More formal quantitative/qualitative assessment of the impact of this project would begin with a 3-stage survey of students’ self-assessments of their own online identities (1) at the beginning of the course, (2) right after the investigation of their online presence, (3) after a 1-week workshop to clean up and actively construct their online identities. Ultimately, I would like to develop, in cooperation with Student Affairs, an orientation for incoming freshmen and an optional refresher workshop—through career services--for students about to begin their job searches and graduate applications. Educause has asked me to disseminate the results of this project in a national ECAR Research Bulletin and in their research journal Educause Quarterly. I will explore further means of making this research project public.

Fox, Susannah, Kathryn Zickuhr and Aaron Smith. “Twitter and Status Updating, Fall 2009.” Pew Internet and American Life Report , 2009, available from: http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2009/17-Twitter-and-Status-Updating-F... [2]

Smith, Shannon, Gail Salaway, and Judith Borreson Caruso, with an Introduction by Richard N. Katz. The ECAR Study of Undergraduate Students and Information Technology, 2009 (Research Study, Vol. 6). Boulder, CO: EDUCAUSE Center for Applied Research, 2009, available from http://www.educause.edu/ecar [3].

Groups audience:
President's Teaching Scholars Program

Source URL:https://www.cu.edu/ptsp/assessing-and-addressing-students-online-identities

Links
[1] https://www.cu.edu/ptsp/assessing-and-addressing-students-online-identities
[2] http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2009/17-Twitter-and-Status-Updating-Fall-2009.aspx
[3] http://www.educause.edu/ecar