

Recapping the Florida Educational Technology Conference: social media tools vs. educational Web 2.0

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Tom DiScipio, founder of the educational social media tool, ePals, gave an in-depth presentation on the ups and downs of social networking tools vs. Web 2.0 education platforms at the 32 Annual Florida Educational Technology Conference (FETC) held in late January. He launched the session with hard-hitting statistics on privacy laws, or the lack thereof. According to a recent study of Columbia University students, 94 percent of those surveyed said they were sharing personal information on Facebook that they did not intend to make public. DiScipio also noted that 20 million minors are currently on Facebook, with 7.5 million users under age 13, and five million under 10 years old. He said the top reasons most teachers utilize popular social networking tools such as Facebook or Twitter in the classroom is because they are most familiar with them and are not aware of other options.

Safety and privacy issues with social media tools are a major concern in the education arena. DiScipio offered a hefty rundown of cons with mass market social media, including:

- Safety and policy management
- Role-based permissions at customized and administrator levels
- Not always “on task”
- Students under age 13 (age of consent)
- Archiving/storage
- Privacy – personal info tracking/advertising
- School/district employment
- Not curricular in functionality
- Requires more time for collaborative tasks
- Requires outside third party applications be used to complete tasks
- Does not integrate other K-12 third party apps

Not totally aimed at tooting ePals’ horn, DiScipio noted several Web 2.0 educational organizations that successfully provide K-12 social networking, including Schoology, Edmodo, eChalk, and Gaggle. Of course, ePals was the main focus. It is currently “the Internet’s largest and fastest-growing K-12 social learning network,” reaching more than 25 million teachers and students around the globe.

ePals’ many solutions bundle into a solid model for other vendors to reference and build on when customizing and marketing their product. DiScipio stressed the importance of global interaction. With ePals’ Global Community feature, students and teachers can communicate and work on projects with other classes worldwide. Further key ePals features include secure email with language translation capability, virtual workspaces with digital storage, and curriculum-based services to improve reading, writing and critical thinking skills through a matching of students with mentors and applicable learning material.

DiScipio said that when employing a school-based social media platform, districts reported students are less prone to inappropriate behavior. ePals is designed for safety, with strict policy management, assigned roles and permissions, and teacher supervision.

Only the tip of the social-media iceberg has been touched in this day of virtual communication and Web 2.0’s reign. Social networking platforms geared toward specific industries such as education (ePals), working professionals (LinkedIn, Yammer), or government (GovLoop) will continue to expand across international markets. Solutions that offer a bevy of networking capability, strong security and multiple resources in one package are most likely to appeal to organizations seeking the most effective product to help their users thrive.

For a complete recap of FETC including sessions on virtualization, green computing, high-density Wi-Fi challenges, and tablet technology in the classroom, please go [here](#). Also, follow me on Twitter @GovWinKRidley for the latest state and local buzz.