

More Questions Than Answers:
Assessing the Impact of Online Social Networking
on a Service-Learning Project

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This article details the evolution and results of a service-learning project designed to extend cross-cultural relationships via online social networking between students at a U.S. Bureau of Indian Education boarding school and teacher candidates in a required diversity course. The goals for the partnership included helping Native American students identify personal strengths through mentoring relationships, and encouraging teacher education candidates to develop their intercultural communication skills. We assessed the project through several lenses: identification of significant themes emerging from teacher candidates' reflections; and comparison of recurring reflection themes to stages of Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity. The analysis reveals challenges and opportunities for student and candidate learning and stimulates questions that shape future directions for service-learning in an increasingly digitized world.

Key words: service-learning; diversity; teacher candidates; intercultural communication; e-mentoring; social media

Connection is what people crave; it is what makes us human. Maslow (1954) illustrates the importance of relationships with others in a "hierarchy of needs" where the need to belong and to be loved is second only to physiological and safety needs. Today, online social networking sites present new venues for personal connection and relationships.

The volume and variety of young people interacting online render it a rich environment for collaboration and civic engagement.ⁱ Recognizing the potential for social media to create active, engaged citizens, the Corporation for National and Community Service sponsored a grant competition to promote the engagement of college students in service through social media (CNCS, 2008). This paper details the evolution and results of one such project and explores the following questions:

1. Is online social networking an effective tool to build mentoring relationships between service-learning participants from diverse backgrounds?
2. Do online interactions contribute to the development of intercultural sensitivity?
3. What benefits and challenges emerge from using this high-tech medium in a traditionally face-to-face pedagogy?

Context

A young Native American (NA) student's cell phone chat, twenty-first century technology in action, provided an immediate link to traditional cultural knowledge. The elder at the other end of the line listened to the girl's request: "I'm with these people at a workshop and they're looking for some words in our language to describe the field of education as a valuable gift, something important to life." After listening for a moment, the young woman jotted two words on a dinner napkin; her friends at the table nodded their agreement. The Lakota phrase *wiconi waste* (pronounced wee-choh-nee-wahsh-day) or "the good life" thus became the foundation of our project title. [We later changed the spelling from *waste* to *washte* to avoid confusion.]

To distinguish between the different groups of participants involved in the ensuing collaboration, Native Americans enrolled at the boarding school will be referred to as students; their teachers will be referred to as teachers. Pre-service teachers enrolled in a diversity course at the university will be referred to as candidates; their instructors will be referred to as instructors.

Wiconi Washte: Education began as a workshop created in 2009 to serve the needs of two populations: high school freshmen from a U. S. Bureau of Indian Education (B.I.E.) boarding school and teacher candidates enrolled in a required diversity course at our Midwestern university. The workshop introduces high school freshmen to the career of teaching and helps them explore and celebrate their individual abilities while teacher candidates develop their skills working with diverse students. Each spring semester, a cohort of these NA students visits our campus to attend career exploration workshops hosted by the university's colleges. Administrators from both institutions designed the academy for mutual benefits; the program is intended to help students prepare for and succeed in college and to foster a campus culture that promotes such success (Lee, 2007).

Because we draw most of our university students from small towns and farming communities in the region, we comprise a relatively homogenous group of Caucasians from northern European descent. Most of our teacher candidates have had limited opportunities to interact with diverse populations, and few have travelled to places where they might encounter people of different ethnicities. This may limit their effectiveness in communicating and understanding their future students from diverse backgrounds (Cushner, 2009). A

Human Relations course, required in the first or second semester of our three-semester teacher education program, is the primary course where candidates focus on understanding pluralistic societies, cultural perspectives, the impact of biases and stereotypes, and ways to engage various groups of students. Given the course goals, our programmatic need for more interaction with diverse student populations (NCATE, 2008), and the need for the NA high school students to have college students as role models (Lee, personal communication, March 8, 2009), having teacher candidates in the Human Relations course develop and host workshops seemed like a perfect fit.

In the spring of 2009, these candidates evaluated their workshop experiences, and they expressed a strong desire to extend the duration of the interaction. In response, we created a website to move some of the original workshop goals to an online environment and extend the opportunity for mentoring relationships to evolve between candidates and students.

In the fall five groups of candidates (15-18 each visit) spent one hour interacting with and observing students in the technology course that provides the bulk of their limited computer access. Collaborating with the boarding school technology teacher connected our online networking goals to the technology course goals and to student needs. As the students created movies and worked with graphic images in their class, the website served as a gallery for displaying their work, and the candidates served as an interested audience and appreciative critics. In face-to-face meetings with the students, the candidates expressed their positive reactions to the quality of the work and technical skills displayed on the site, and boarding school teachers noted an increase in student confidence and self-efficacy.

Although the website began filling up with video clips and graphics from students, our candidates were slow to upload their profiles and pictures without the prompting of well-structured course assignments. By May 2010, the website had 146 members, including 37 students, 7 university NA Club members, and 102 candidates; eight observers and instructors are included in the count. Table 1 illustrates the number and types of interactions both students and candidates had on the site.

Table 1
Website Profile

NA Boarding School Students & university NA Club Members	Candidates
37 members, spring & fall semesters in technology class; 7 university NA Club members	96 members from Human Relations course, spring & fall semesters, 2009-2010; 8 faculty, including course instructors & interested observers
335 photos and videos uploaded	45 photos and videos uploaded
19 personalized front pages	20 personalized pages
27 posts or blogs	13 posts or blogs
Postings to candidates:1	Postings to students:4

Assessment

We evaluated the *Wiconi Washte: Education* project from multiple perspectives, including both formative and summative assessments: (1) focused interviews with individual candidates, (2) taped interviews with small groups of candidates after face-to-face meetings

with students, (3) a teacher survey, (4) teacher comments, (5) discussion among instructors following class discussions on the project, and (6) scrutiny of website usage. Analyzing the results of these evaluations in the context of a literature review enables us to assess our relative level of success in achieving our two primary goals: developing mentoring relationships and enhancing candidates' intercultural sensitivity.

Developing Mentoring Relationships

We created the website to provide additional opportunities for students and candidates to connect and interact. The abundance of personal profiles uploaded by students often included sports settings, pictures of family and friends with formal, informal, and even silly expressions. From our perspective as instructors, conditions were ripe for candidates to make connections, relate common interests, and strike up conversations that could lead to genuine mentoring between them and students in this online setting. While a few of our candidates responded positively to this opportunity to connect to students, most did not. Those who attempted to befriend the students were not persistent enough to develop conversations beyond the surface level. For example, one candidate posted the following inquiry to a student: "your pictures look like fun! do you like to ski?" The response was brief: "it was just a skool trip but yeah i geuss it was fun..." End of conversation. What could account for this lack of engagement? Studies on the emerging practice of e-mentoring assure us that developing online mentoring relationships is, in fact, possible. E-mentoring is a relatively new approach to the well-established practice of matching experienced and inexperienced people for the purpose of training. Our website concept and design aligns with the following definition of e-mentoring by Single and Muller (2001):

[E-mentoring is] a relationship that is established between a more senior/experienced individual (the mentor) and a lesser skilled or experienced individual (the protégé), primarily using electronic communications, that is intended to develop to grow the skills, knowledge and confidence and cultural understanding of the protégé to help him or her succeed, while also assisting in the development of the mentor (p. 108).

With candidates as mentors, we had hoped to enhance student understanding of the world of higher education and prompt them to consider careers in education. In the process, the mentors would gain insights into the lives of students and would develop their intercultural communication skills. Through the online service-learning relationship, we intended to benefit both the mentor and protégé by providing a platform for shared learning and growth that was both boundary-less and egalitarian (Bierema & Merriam, 2002), offering the logistical advantage of being able to communicate without regard to time and space (Shrestha et al., 2009).

E-mentoring offers the potential of leveling status between partners (Shrestha et al., 2009; Single & Single, 2005) and minimizing some of the power dynamics that typically characterize mentoring relationships (Bierema & Merriam, 2002). However, our project design, combining face-to-face meetings with online communication, prevented any masking of status differences. While our design did not allow for anonymity, the advantage of beginning the relationship with a face-to-face connection appeared to outweigh the possible increase in egalitarianism. Shrestha et al. (2009) suggested that some mentors may perform more skillfully and comfortably in face-to-face contexts, while Bierema and Merriam (2002) reported that parties who have never met in person find it difficult to achieve "virtual intimacy." We anticipated the addition of individual profiles to offer the further advantage of helping candidates relate to the students by looking at their pictures.

Shih (2009) noted the importance of informal glimpses into the lives of others, such as seeing someone's dog, as a way to get to know people.

While comments of the candidates clearly indicated that they enjoyed viewing the student profiles, this appreciation did not translate into attempts to mentor the students. Conversations and relationships did not spontaneously begin on the website, and increasing encouragement from the instructors failed to stimulate more engagement. This lack of interaction seems to support Single and Single's (2005) finding that the online environment can exacerbate some of the challenges that hamper traditional mentoring. In face-to-face meetings, the physical presence of the other prods the mentor to action, and the mentee is likely to respond. A virtual presence does not appear to have the same catalytic effect.

The limited online interaction between the two communities also supports the concept of "frail commitments" as characteristic of virtual relationships, given the ease with which they can be initiated or ended (Bierema & Merriam, 2002). The one-semester length of the project exacerbated this frailty of commitment. Candidates had approximately 12-weeks to complete their service-learning hours; unless they were placed at the boarding school for another education course later in their program, it was unlikely that they would be able to continue any mentoring relationship that was initiated. Did the short duration of our project contribute to an ambivalent passivity for both the mentor and protégé? Did this lack of a permanent relationship contribute to mistrust between groups?

Student perspectives.

The difficulty of establishing a trusting relationship online was a recurring theme in candidate reflections. Candidates noted the "non-realistic qualities that are a part of the Internet," and the "lack of intimacy" or the loss of credibility because of the online medium, rather than a "real life, reassuring, substantial relationship wherein both can learn from one another" in a face-to-face exchange. One candidate remarked that, "If I were a student [at this boarding school], I would find it difficult to be able to be even remotely open with a stranger...[there is a] need for a certain level of trust." Our candidates also lacked confidence in the trustworthiness of this medium for conveying a true sense of who the communicators really are. They feared that participants "might not ever truly have a sense of the person they are" because it is "difficult to access anything beyond surface level information" or "to ask for advice of someone you don't know or trust."

Other candidates challenged the concept of using a social networking site in an academic context: "Things such as Facebook are just used so much more that it becomes pointless in our minds to access another social networking site...[we] do not have time...[we] do not want to be involved in another social networking site." Some dismissed outright the possibility of establishing another online relationship: "For most people, at least for me, a successful relationship involves getting to know each other face to face not through an Internet site." Poor writing ability was also noted as an obstacle to such communication. If the students lack writing skills, they might hesitate to expose this deficiency in public; in practice, candidates might react with similar hesitation.

Instructor Observations.

In observing our candidates in both face-to-face encounters and in the online environment, we noted evidence of a passive commitment to create relationships. Candidates were often hesitant to meet and greet. In both settings some candidates required overt encouragement and guidance, but the majority did make attempts to get to know the students. For the face-to-face encounters, we intentionally modeled and taught techniques

for engagement. Still, some candidates hugged the walls during the visits to the school technology classroom while others were content to observe from the security of a chair in the back. Several candidates appeared to find a comfort zone by sitting next to one student, ignoring directions to circulate among all the students.

While we hoped that the online environment would improve candidates' abilities to converse with comfort and ease, the final website tally reveals that most candidates saw the online environment as a wall, further impeding the development of relationships. Did the virtual world of online social networking create a sense of remoteness for candidates that allowed even more of them to hug the online walls, just as some did in the classroom encounters?

Yet, despite claims from the candidates that "Tutoring requires rapport, face-to-face, direct contact," some of them were equally disengaged during classroom visits. Rationalization of motive might be serving as a defense mechanism here. Cushner and Brislin's (1996) framework for understanding cross-cultural interactions indicates that a certain level of anxiety and discomfort often accompanies individuals encountering new experiences in diverse settings.

Increasing Intercultural Sensitivity

The second of our two primary goals for this project was to enhance candidates' intercultural sensitivity. This goal was assessed by analyzing candidates' reflections and by implementing a pre- post-test. Assessment descriptions and results are detailed below.

Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity

In light of their reluctance to engage with the NA students on the website and during classroom visits, we analyzed candidates' reflections through the lens of Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) (1986, 1993) to assess the relative levels of intercultural sensitivity they revealed. The DMIS identifies six stages of development across two sides of a continuum that correspond to the way individuals experience difference (Bennett, 1986). Three ethnocentric stages include denial of, defense against, and minimization of difference; ethnorelative stages include acceptance of, adaptation to, and integration of difference. We applied this theoretical framework to the candidates' reflections by identifying phrases and sentences that corresponded to Bennett's examples of what people say at various stages (1986).

Analysis of the candidates' reflections through the lens of the DMIS continuum revealed a broad range of intercultural sensitivity. Some appeared to operate at the ethnocentric *Defense* stage, characterized by the dualistic thinking and negative stereotyping shared in the following observation:

These students have more chances at getting a higher education and I sometimes feel that they waste that opportunity. It was hard for me to watch videos of the students showing me what they did on the weekends and thinking of thousands of other students who would love the chance to go to school...and get paid.

This expression of firmly held preconceived ideas and stereotyping assumptions shows evidence of black/white thinking.

Candidates' reflections consistent with rhetoric expressed during the ethnocentric stage of *Minimization* include "Having student up loading their work shows me that they are just like my friends and I." Individuals at this stage of intercultural sensitivity believe that people are essentially the same and "like me."

The ability to recognize cultural differences in values and behavior is a benchmark of individuals thinking at the ethnorelative stage of *Acceptance*. Evidence of a candidate operating at this level emerges in this reflection:

Every student is different, especially when it comes to personal learning, needs and interests. As a teacher, we need to accommodate all of these things and be aware of them. What makes me think of this is everybody's display picture. Some people have a picture of themselves or with some friends, while others had pictures of art or other images.

Other reflections reveal similar levels of intercultural sensitivity:

The different backgrounds allowed us and the students to pick their own color and design scheme, personalizing it for the single person...the website is an opportunity for us teachers to learn about diversity and to see how everybody is different.

[It was] very interesting to see people of a different culture's artistic ways.

A website like that also allows the students to express themselves individually; every student is different.

Evidence from analysis of candidates' reflections indicates that the exchange of videos and personal photos on the Wiconi Waste website helped dispel some of the narrow, stereotypical views that many have of Indians today. The following observation reveals such a perspective:

I noticed photos of traditional dress next to photos of friends in hip hop styles; there was no one typical preference... the profiles and pictures uploaded depicted a wide-ranging variety of lifestyles and interests; the imagery included scenes of Western style rodeo, graphic Gothic masks, NBA basketball, NFL football, prom, traditional Indian pow-wows, urban, rural and the whole gamut of takeoffs on popular culture.

Finally, in Bennett's ethnorelative stage of *Adaptation*, a genuine sense of empathy emerges. This perspective is indicated in the following candidate reflection:

I also learned that some of these students don't even know where their parents are and the Indian School is the only real home they have. It was such a shock to me to hear this because I could never imagine living at high school.

Analysis of candidate reflections through the lens of Bennett's DMIS scale revealed that this pool of seemingly homogeneous candidates, at the same point in their pre-service education, displayed markedly different and broadly ranging levels of intercultural sensitivity.

Implications and Areas for Further Study

This study reaffirms the fact that the development of cross-cultural sensitivity is a difficult concept to measure. Given the complexity of the subject matter, research in this area requires a finely-honed tool; one that is able to elicit honest, rather than socially acceptable, responses. Changes in nebulous developmental constructs such as cross-cultural sensitivity are more likely to manifest themselves in a longitudinal study.

The challenge of creating genuine online relationships between service-learning participants requires further exploration as we consider the value and future use of the *Wiconi Washte: Education* website. In evaluating low levels of candidate participation on the website, we recognize that programmatic structural changes are necessary. Single et al. (2005) identified coaching as a valuable tool for increasing participation. The National Mentoring Partnership (2010) suggested that such coaching should include regular email reminders to stay in touch with mentees and to encourage and motivate participants. Other strategies need to be explored to strengthen weak relationships between participants and to coax the involvement of casual observers and those who hug the virtual walls of the website.

What are the possibilities for enabling electronic networks to truly connect two populations? One future direction to consider emerges from the success experienced by online book communities (Peowski, 2010). Public libraries with websites for book reviews created by teens draw spontaneous online contributions from this age group. Would it be possible to have NA students and candidates form mentoring relationships while discussing books? Could the content of the book be the shared experience that appears to be missing from our current efforts?

In addition, how might the design and openness of the website encourage more effective interactions between mentor and mentee? O'Neill (2004) suggested the possibility of increasing social capital through a group style of mentoring or "mentoring in the open" (p. 179). Research on learning communities describes several types of knowledge necessary for teacher development, one of which is "knowledge *in practice*" (Hammersness, Darling-Hammond, & Bransford, 2005, p. 382). Would there be opportunities within an open website for sharing expertise between teacher educators and teacher candidates in the context of specific learning situations?

Single and Single (2005) suggested that while some people will engage in discussions, others will "lurk," reading but not responding to the posts. Yet, as Banks et al. (2005) noted, simply experiencing diverse communities does not necessarily drive learning; transformative understanding comes through observing and then reflecting. As candidates examined their assumptions and biases on the website, what was the value in that level of participation?

This investigation of the efficacy and appropriate use of an online social networking website to develop, foster, and maintain relationships between service-learning partners produced more questions than answers. While the field of e-mentoring is becoming well established, connecting service-learning partners through online media is a relatively new approach and an area ripe for further research (Perren, 2003; Single & Single, 2005).

As Web 2.0 tools continue to develop, so too will opportunities to explore online social networking as a means of establishing and nurturing service-learning partnerships. The extent to which such efforts are successful will depend on several factors above and

beyond the protocols already established for face-to-face partnerships. This study concludes with a list of recommendations for future e-mentoring practice and study.

- Guidelines for face-to-face mentoring relationships are valuable in e-mentoring contexts as well. Specifically, academic and/or social purposes need to be clearly established and communicated for the relationships to be valued and nurtured.
- Some participants indicated confusion over the concept of having an online *social* networking site that also has *academic* purposes. Further study should explore how to effectively link the academic and social applications of online networking.
- Developing a relationship based solely on electronic communication can be challenging. As our candidates suggested, relationships between mentor and mentee would benefit from face-to-face meetings. Further investigation might explore the quantity and quality of online vs. face-to-face encounters to ascertain the optimum levels for both types of interactions.
- The power of sharing images and personal profiles should be investigated as an important feature in using a social networking link, especially when those images can dispel misconceptions and stereotypes and stretch world views.
- The use of open online forums in a whole group mentoring process should be explored as a way to develop communities of practice that build social capital for service-learning partners.
- Although computers are increasingly available, the digital divide remains a concern. The accessibility of the necessary tools and technological skills for all participants should be considered in order to ensure a level playing field in e-mentoring situations.

Are there other unrecognized advantages and disadvantages to using online forums to develop relationships between service-learning partners? Might the public nature of this discourse be an obstacle to sharing? At the moment, we have more questions than answers. Further research is necessary.

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