ASCOTech:
Digital Social Networking and Health Care Education

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Do you have a presence on My Space (http://www.myspace.com/), Facebook (http://www.facebook.com/) and LinkedIn (http://www.linkedin.com/)? Do you tweet on Twitter (http://twitter.com/)? Do you broadcast your blogs (https://www.blogger.com/)? Your students certainly do. You would think that digital social networking would be an incredible opportunity for us to develop "teaching moments" within a new social context not encumbered by the usual stressors and expectations of health care education.

We know that 85% of college students use Facebook, with 60% logging in daily. Of the college students who use Facebook, almost 85% visit once a week, with 93% of them checking in at least once a month.[1] Librarians in academia are being asked for help to set up Facebook pages and are taking an interest in how students use these new tools.[2]

Faculty from the Georgia Institute of Technology conducted a survey at a mid-sized public research university to understand how contact on Facebook was influencing student perceptions of faculty. They found that one-third of the students surveyed did not want faculty on Facebook because of possible identity and privacy concerns, even though contact on Facebook had no effect on the students' ratings of professors.[3]

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Figure 1
Facebook Page of
Dr. Nathan Bonnilla-Warford's Practice

Do health care students use digital social networking as well? One study noted that social networking with Facebook was very common among medical students. As many as 44.5% had an account and 64.3% said they used it frequently. Medical residents however, used it less frequently (12.8%). A review of the students who used Facebook found that the majority of those evaluated (83.3%) listed at least one form of personally identifiable information, and only a third (37.5%) were made private. Unfortunately, some of the students' Facebook pages displayed what could be interpreted as unprofessional content as well.[4]

Can social networking help us teach professionalism and ethics?[5] Can we use Web-based professional development portfolios to promote "right, moral and professional behavior," as our students journey toward becoming health care professionals?[6] What about those of us who conduct research? Is it professional and ethical to do research using Internet social networking sites? What guidelines should we use? What about privacy and consent issues?[7] Currently there are more questions than answers. As far as we can tell from a PubMed search on this topic, those of us in optometric education have not even been asking the questions.

So if we do not really know at this time how facing the music on Facebook, tweeting on Twitter and giving folks plenty of room on My Space can affect what we do as educators, do we know what the future of health care will look like when we are all interconnected?Are we teaching what our students need to know to survive in a technologically networked world? One article, "Take two aspirin and tweet me in the morning…" suggests that at least some medical practices will move beyond telemedicine and electronic health care records toward something more intimate and personal.[8]

The office of Nathan Bonilla-Warford, OD, FAAO,[9] uses digital social networking to educate patients, to help support charitable activities, to promote business-to-business marketing,[10] and to professionally market their many services to a wider community. They blog,[11] Twitter[12] (they have 629 followers!), and have even been given six stars on the Yelp rating service.[13] Are we educating our students for this kind of open-to-the-world 21st century?

I (DM) have discovered that one of the easiest ways to keep my students current on research in the areas of eye and vision care of children and special needs patients is to blog it at them.[14] This allows the student to choose which articles to look up and read, whether they are on campus or at an off-campus affiliated site. I remind them by a quick "tweet" and an announcement on my Facebook page when my blog is updated. They have also been known to make comments and send me messages about these articles so that "unofficial"

Figure 2
Dr. Dominick Maino's Blog
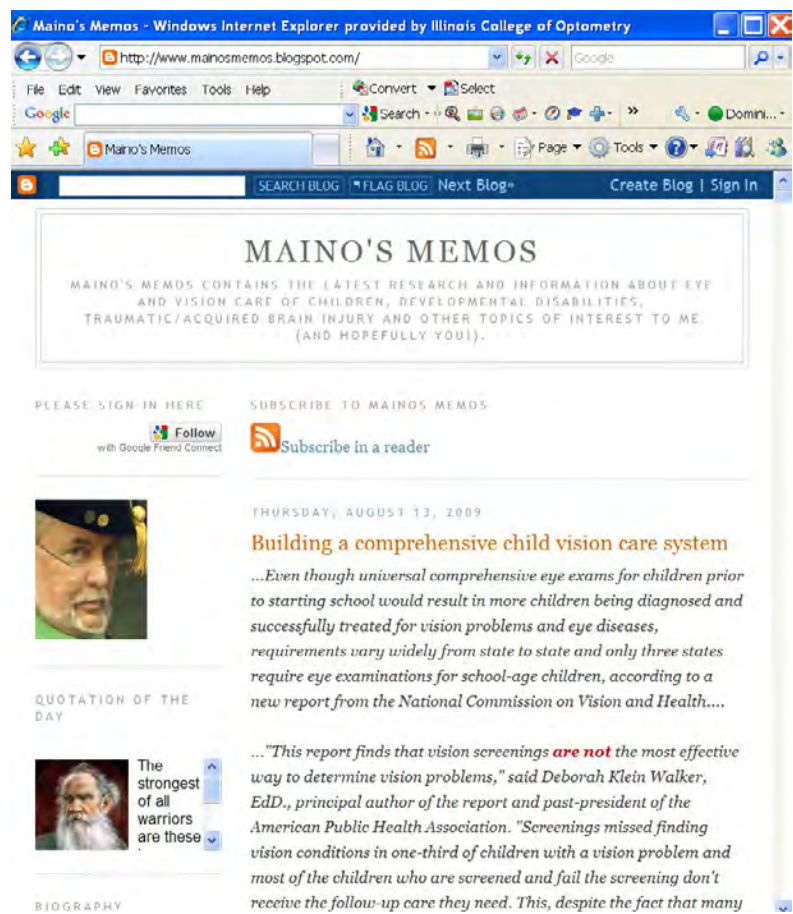
teaching/learning can take place. I can only imagine what might happen if I incorporated digital social networking into the courses and laboratories that I teach. Would learning occur more readily?

How do optometry school administrators use the social networking sites? Dr. Taline Farra, Assistant Dean of Students and Director of Admissions at the New England College of Optometry, tells us: "We have been using Facebook as a way to keep contact with our incoming students. Last year, we set up a page for the class of 2012, and it was a venue where students could meet each other virtually before they arrived and a place where they could ask questions of our staff. We are in the process of setting up a general info group for … questions people may have." Other schools are also dipping their digital feet into the cyberspace pond as well, but cautiously.

Are there other uses for Internet interfacing other than research and student recruitment? With dwindling fiscal resources and alumni support constraints during these difficult economic times, can the schools and colleges of optometry use digital social networking as a mechanism to raise funds? Fund Raising Success[15] notes that "… as of July 2009, there are more than 6 million users on Facebook older than 55, with total growth of 513.7% in the previous six months alone. That makes your main donor demographic … the fastest-growing Facebook user segment." They also state: "Online outreach is a

cost-effective and efficient way to reach people at a time when we're all low on resources," and "Word-of-mouth marketing has historically been the most powerful way to engage people with your brand, and social marketing is really word-of-mouth marketing at its core…. It is a relational way to engage the communities that support your brand and mission." Can you Twitter dollars or Facebook endowments? These sites have not yet been noted as being viable fund raisers at this time, but large organizations like United Way[16] and Easter Seals[17] see them as offering great potential. Finally, Facebook itself offers Facebook For Good,[18] a site where you can share your stories about how Facebook has helped individuals give back to their communities and effect positive change.
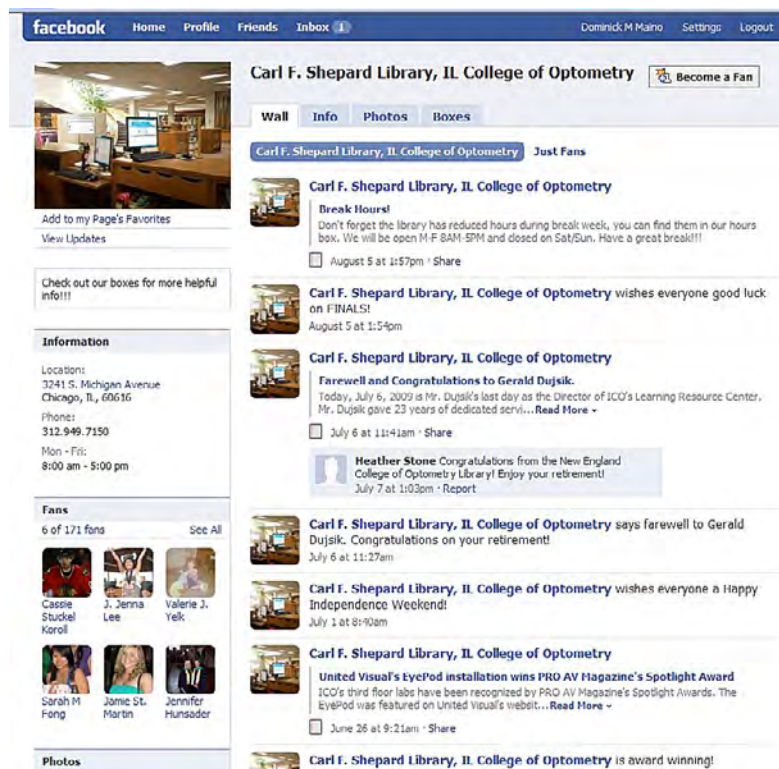
Will learning in a socially interconnected, digital environment lead to a more personal approach toward acquiring knowledge? Will this allow our students to learn professionalism and ethics appropriately? Or will it all become a collection of online connected "National Enquirers" of sensationalism with a total lack of regard for personal privacy and standards expected from a more genteel and civilized society? Will the schools and colleges of optometry use cyber-socializing for research, student recruitment, and fund raising? It is obvious there are numerous questions. Who will do the research?

Drs. Maino and Goodfellow invite you to offer your feedback about this and all ASCOTech columns and to make suggestions for future columns by emailing dmaino@ico.edu and/or GGoodfel@ico.edu. Please visit http://www.MainosMemos.blogspot.com as well.

Figure 3

Librarians at the Carl F. Shepard Library at Illinois College of Optometry use Facebook to keep in touch with students and faculty.

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