Facebook: A School Librarian's Tool for Building a Community of Readers

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Abstract

In this paper Facebook is examined as an educational tool that can be used to facilitate the development of literacy skills. The philosophical assumptions underlying the Social Development Theory by Vygotsky and the Social Learning Theory by Bandura were used to substantiate the benefits students can gain from learning in a social environment such as Facebook. Librarians can help students to develop their literacy skills, by using the Literature Circle on facebook. Assigning readers roles such as literary luminary, synthesizer, analyzer, and evaluator and rotating these roles will allow readers to develop the various literacy skills overtime and to avoid monotony.

Facebook, social learning, Literature Circle

Introduction

The technological age in which we are now living has given rise to numerous technological innovations that continue to mystify its users. So rapid are these innovations that one can hardly keep abreast of them. However, it is of importance to note that many of these innovations can be used as educational tools to assist in the teaching/learning process. It is obvious that each new innovation seems to have a very strong influence on young adults and this is why educators need to capitalize on them to create an environment that supports teaching and learning. One such innovation that has captured young adults is social networking which includes Myspace, Hi5, and Facebook. This new technological online frontier is interactive and therefore, it makes it easier to create environments in which students can learn, receive feedback, and continually process their understanding and construct new knowledge.

The skills that school librarians received through training will allow them to use these social networks in a safe environment to create opportunities to promote libraries, offer support to students' learning and literacy and provide a user-friendly medium for synchronous and asynchronous communication. Facebook is one such medium that librarians can use as a tool to show its users that libraries are willing to use modern technology to deliver its curriculum. This move will encourage young adults to frequently use the library because it is fulfilling their educational as well as their social needs.

The theoretical assumptions of Social Learning

According to Learning Theories Knowledgebase (2008), Vygotsky's theory is one of the foundations of constructivism. It asserts three major themes:

1. Social interaction plays a fundamental role in the process of cognitive development. In contrast to Jean Piaget's understanding of child development (in which development necessarily precedes learning), Vygotsky felt social learning precedes development.
2. The More Knowledgeable Other (MKO). The MKO refers to anyone who has a better understanding or a higher ability level than the learner, with respect to a particular task, process, or concept. The MKO is normally thought of as being a teacher, coach, or older adult, but the MKO could also be peers, a younger person, or even computers.
3. The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). The ZPD is the distance between a student's ability to perform a task under adult guidance and/or with peer collaboration and the student's ability solving the problem independently. According to Vygotsky, learning occurred in this zone.

Vygotsky focused on the connections between people and the sociocultural context in which they act and interact in shared experiences (Crawford, 1996). According to Vygotsky, humans use tools that develop from a culture, such as speech and writing, to mediate their social environments. Initially children develop these tools to serve solely as social functions, ways to communicate needs. Vygotsky believed that the internalization of these tools led to higher thinking skills (Crawford 1996).

Applications of the Vygotsky's Social Development Theory

Many schools have traditionally held a transmissionist or instructionist model in which a teacher or lecturer 'transmits' information to students. In contrast, Vygotsky's theory promotes learning contexts in which students play an active role in learning. Roles of the teacher and student are therefore shifted, as a teacher should collaborate with his or her students in order to help facilitate meaning construction in students. Learning therefore becomes a reciprocal experience for the students and teacher (Crawford 1996).

Bandura (1977) posited that Vygotsky's theory is complementary to the work of Social Learning Theory. Bandura mentioned that the social learning theory explains human behavior in terms of continuous reciprocal interaction between cognitive, behavioral, and environmental influences. It considers that people learn from one another, including such concepts as observational learning, imitation, and modeling. Ormrod (1999) also explained that it is learning that occurs within a social context. Bandura further explained that a second aspect of Vygotsky's theory is the idea that the potential for cognitive development depends upon the "zone of proximal development" (ZPD): a level of development attained when students engage in social behavior. Full development of the ZPD depends upon full social interaction. The range of skills that can be developed with adult guidance or peer collaboration exceeds what can be attained alone. Vygotsky's theory requires the teacher and students to play untraditional roles as they

collaborate with each other. Instead of a teacher dictating his/her meaning to students for future recitation, a teacher should collaborate with her students in order for them to create their own meaning (Hausfather, 1996).

How Facebook supports social learning

Facebook is a free access website which was founded by Mark Zuckerberg and launched in February 2004. It is able to support social learning because it is a social networking website that connects people with friends and others who work, study and live around the world. It allows users to join the network and meet friends, keep up with what they are doing as well as to connect with coworkers or classmates. As such it creates social interaction among friends. This social utility helps people to communicate more efficiently and it is open to anyone who wants to sign up and interact with the people they know in a trusted environment. (Facebook.com).

As a result of the anatomy of Facebook there is clearly some potential for Facebook as a learning application. Some of these as highlighted on facebook.com are: Facebook Wall which is a space on each user's profile page that allows friends to post messages for the user to see, displaying the time and date the message was written. A user's wall, dependent on privacy settings, is visible to anyone who is able to see that user's profile. Users can always remove comments they don't like from their own Walls. Another feature is News Feed which appears on every user's homepage and highlights information including profile changes, upcoming events, and birthdays, related to the user's friends.

One of the most popular applications on Facebook is the Photos application, where users can upload albums and photos. Privacy settings can be set for each individual album, limiting the groups of users that can see an album. Another feature of the Photos applications is the ability to "tag" users in a photo. For instance, if a photo contains a user's friend, then the user can tag the friend in the photo. This sends a notification to the friend that they have been tagged, and provides them a link to see the photos. Facebook Notes application allows users to share their thoughts through writing with other users. From the Notes page, users can also view all of their friends' notes, as well as find the notes that people have written about them and their friends. Another feature of Facebook is Gifts which allows users to send virtual gifts to a recipient's profile page. The gifts cost US$1.00 each, and a personalized message can be attached to each gift. Marketplace application is a feature that allows users to post free classified advertisements on the website. The newest feature product is the Chat feature. This new component of the website is not an application, but instead is integrated directly into the user's browser as the user browses the Facebook website. The feature allows users to Instant Message their friends (Facebook.com).

The users of Facebook can customize the privacy settings from the Privacy page. From this page users can have total control over who can view selected areas of their profile. At most, only friends, and friends of friends on each user network can view the profile. If users want to adjust who can find them in searches and what these people can view, the users need to edit the settings for their Search Privacy. Users can utilize the "Block" feature to end all interactions with someone on Facebook by entering their name in the "Block People" box. Once the users find them in the search, click the "Block Person" link to the right of their name and they will no

longer be able to find you using Facebook. Finally, by default, only users within the network and confirmed friends can view the profile.

Adjustments can be made to edit the friends by using the following steps:

1. Go to the Privacy page.
2. On the following page click "Profile."
3. The main setting, entitled "Profile," will allow customization of the profile page (About Facebook 2008).

Shelfari – the Supporting Application

Shelfari, an application which supports building a community of readers was launched in October 2006, and it is reported by Shelfari.com that it is one of the fastest growing vertically oriented social media sites on the Internet. With tens of thousands of bibliophiles already registered on the free site, Shelfari represents a vibrant community of readers who actively participate and express themselves through their passion for books. This is made possible by Shelfari the leading social media site for book lovers. They have designed a new application for Facebook members to allow them to easily rate, review and share their books with Facebook friends and connect with one another via their love of literature. The Shelfari application for Facebook will further extend this community and enable Facebook members to explore and discover an entirely new landscape of books, authors, and fellow readers. Unlike the majority of Facebook book applications that were built by independent software developers, the Shelfari Facebook application connects with the vibrant community of Shelfari.com and enables users to connect their book activity within Facebook to the deep book-centered world on Shelfari.com. Facebook application users can view all their books on a virtual bookshelf, import books already added on Shelfari.com, rate and review their books, and share those ratings and reviews automatically through Facebook's personal newsfeeds. They also can view the rich book information and discussions from Shelfari without leaving Facebook. To use the Shelfari application, Facebook members can go to: http://apps.facebook.com/shelfari/ or search for Shelfari" directly from the Facebook applications directory (Shelfari.com)

The Facebook Platform represents a seismic shift in the way people are using social networks to express themselves and new applications like Shelfari's will enable Facebook members to instantly engage with a large community of readers," said Josh Hug, Shelfari's CEO and co-founder. "The Shelfari application is unique because it not only enables Facebook members to quickly share their reading lists but it also provides an avenue of exploration via the Shelfari site which is deeper than what can be provided by an independent third party developer whose applications are disconnected from a larger, vertically-oriented community."

The features mentioned can provide social interaction in a learning environment. Robbins (2007) mentioned that increasing social interactions in learning is never a bad thing so using a tool that makes social interaction so easy has to be a good thing. Robbins also think that it's beneficial to integrate learning into social spaces because it reinforces the idea that learning doesn't just happen in privileged spaces but can happen anywhere. What better place to initiate this than in the library with librarians who are aware of how technology can be used to improve

student learning and literacy. In addition to this, facebook is a tool that can be used to reach students who are not aware of the value of libraries.

Negative comments about Facebook

Although Facebook can be used as an educational tool it must be noted that there are various challenges. It is reported by Bertner and Shelton (nd), that some of the challenges that occur are stalking, identity theft, prospective employers use Facebook as a background check, and school administrators use Facebook for academic decisions and judicial sanctions. However, these challenges can be addressed if these young adults are guided by information professionals such as school librarians.

Using Facebook to build a community of readers

Dyke (2005) mentioned that building a community of readers encourages reading and discussion of a book in a casual setting and not as an assignment to earn a grade. However, to ensure that the community of readers is sustained and that best practice guidelines are observed librarians need to begin right. Secker (2008) mentioned that these best practices should include:
1) Spending some time reading about the security and privacy settings relating to your account.
2) Making sure you are happy with (and understand) the security settings you have saved.
3) Being selective about who you accept as a friend, so don't accept requests from people that are not known to you.
4) Users should limit the amount of time you spend on Facebook so it doesn't become an addiction!

It would also be useful to read studies conducted about Facebook in relation to libraries and librarians. In addition to this, read professional papers about using Facebook as an educational tool especially with respect to reading and development of literacy skills. This will give a clear indication of how it can help your users to improve their literacy skills.

When librarians have decided what type of reading community they would like to create, for example, a Literature Circle, a Reading Club, or a Collaborative Reading Group they should write out the objectives to be achieved in measurable terms. In the case of a Literature Circle, for example, this is described by Lynne (2007) as a highly structured reading group consisting of four to six members that is established to encourage discussion on books that are read.

In addition to this, students are given the opportunity to control their own learning, to share thoughts, concerns, and understanding of events of the books they have read. The objectives for this type of community of readers can be to:
1. use the Literature Circle to enhance and improve students literacy skills within one year;
2. have group members read one book monthly;
3. allow each group to post their responses to the reading on the Facebook wall;
4. have group members respond to the other groups' posting;
5. allow individual members to respond within their group to the literature to facilitate individual accountability;

6. provide feedback and guidance from facilitator (librarian);
7. rotate tasks on a monthly basis.

The librarian can now decide how many members are to be in each group (four or sixx). Each group should be assigned a leader. Meet with these members and have a discussion on the project to help them to understand the benefits that they can gain from being a member of your Literature Circle. Let group members become aware of the objectives. Fix dates for posting responses, and agree on the rules if any. Explain to group members that they are going to be assigned roles to guide their responses to the literature and help them prepare for their roles in their circle.

Instructional strategies on line indicated that these roles may be:

• discussion director - develops questions for the group to discuss
• passage picker or literary luminary - chooses a selection that the group rereads and discusses because it is interesting, informative, the climax, well written....
• vocabulary enricher - chooses words that are difficult or used in an unfamiliar way
• connector - finds a connection between the story and another book, event in their personal life or the outside world
• summarizer - prepares a brief summary of the story

Assign the specific roles to each group. The leader of each group is responsible to post the information on the discussion board. These roles which will be rotated are assigned so that students will become proficient in the various literacy skills. It is also designed to prevent them from carrying out the same task as this will likely lead to monotony. It is important to note that the assigning of specific roles to each group will allow for students who are unable to complete the task by themselves to accomplish them successfully by their positive interdependence with other members of their group.

The librarian's role is critical because it serves as guidance throughout the programme. Here he/she is seen as the literacy leader. Cart (2007) mentioned that Shoemaker, former president of the Young Adult Library Services Association and a teacher librarian, states that being a literacy leader means keeping focus on creating, sustaining and promoting a community of readers.

The facilitator/librarian can post a monthly agenda so that each group can be reminded of what needs to be accomplished. He/she can view the responses from individuals or the group and make comments that will reinforce or correct any misunderstanding that members perceived from their reading. Throughout the period the librarian needs to view postings on the "wall" and respond to comments readers make about the book. This is also a means of monitoring readers' individual accountability. Whatever the age, individual like to be rewarded for tasks accomplished. As such the librarian can use the gift feature of Facebook to send a gift to each group profile page along with a personalized message after they have successfully accomplished their task.

In addition to assigning these roles explain to readers that they are to use the Chat Feature to respond to the literature individually to their group members or any other member in the community during their reading. Set a time when all who are involved will join the Facebook as a community of readers.

First of all, the librarian should create a Facebook profile and then invite all the members in the Community of Readers to create their own Facebook profile. Each group leader should then create a group profile and invite the librarian and the other group members to join the group.

Figure 1: The Librarian's Profile
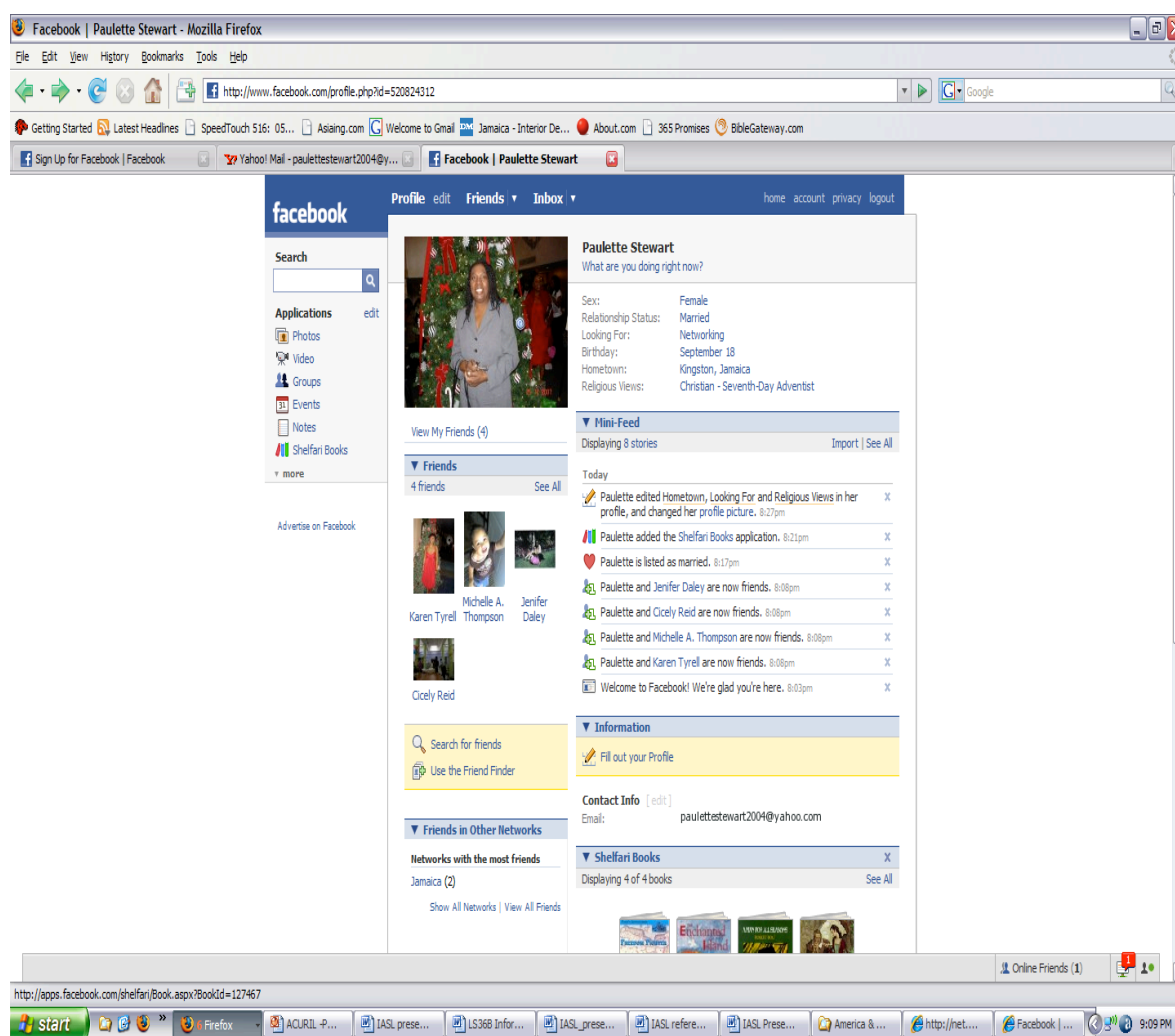
Source: Facebook.com

Figure 2 below shows the page readers need to access to create the group. Ensure that readers click on the word group to get to this page.

Figure 2: Facebook Page to Create Reading Group

Source: Facebook.com

These labels will appear on the group page to guide users in customizing the page. Here is a description that can be placed beside each label.

Name. Give the Literature Circle group a name. Include suggestions from the members of the group to determine this name.

Type of group. This is an educational group so you can use "Books and Literature". Or "Literature Circle".

Description. Write in this space the objectives of the group.

Group type. Indicate that this is a closed group. Members must be invited or approved by you.

Contact information. Insert the contact information for the librarian in charge of the social network.

Photographs. Include the photographs of the group members.

Related groups. These can be other school libraries users who have similar reading activities. They can be given the permission to join the group and make their contribution.

Discussion Board. This can be used by both the librarians and students. The users will post the result of their tasks as well as their response to the report from the other groups. The teacher will use it to make her comments and to guide where necessary.

Posted Items. This provides a means by which the librarian and students alike are able to upload related information from the librarian, such as notes, for all involved to benefit.

The Wall. This is the area where each group member can use the Chat Room of Facebook to interact with each other and to express any thoughts, concerns or interest about the book being read. It can also be used to have interaction about their task before it is placed on the discussion board.

It is important to go to the following page as shown in Figure 3 to activate the security features so that only those in the Literature Circle will be able to access the information written by the group members.

Figure 3: Page that Shows Security Features

Source: Facebook.com

Allow readers to place the book they are reading on Shelfari. This involves clicking on the Application link ~~on~~ of their profile. Select "Browse More Application" on the following page. Type Shelfari in the search box and add the Shelfari Books application. Enter the book title or the International Standard Book Number (ISBN) in the Search Book field as shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Shelfari Search Book Page

Source: http://www.shelfari.com
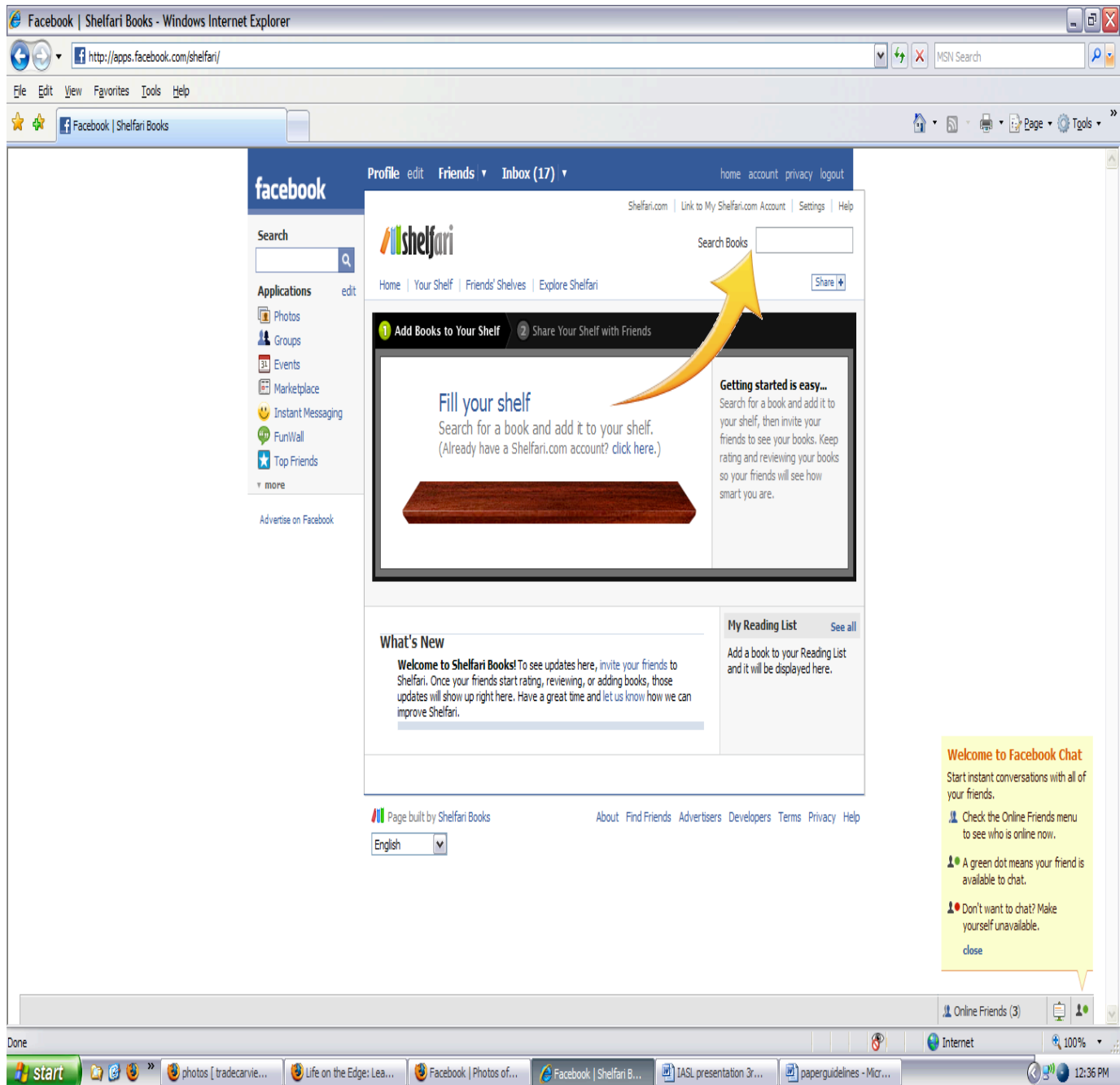
When this is done the books will appear on your facebook profile as seen in Figure 5 below.

Figure 5: Books on Shelf

The selection of books is extremely important because readers need to love and enjoy the books they are reading. Van Dyke (2005) gave some suggestion on selection books for readers. These are:
1. involve students in the selection process;
2. consider the reading levels of all the readers in the community
3. look for tie-in to your community
4. Look for "discussability" – the plot leads to discussion of ideas and values

Beginning the Programme

It is suggested by Van Dyke (2005) that the "Community of Readers" Programme should begin with an interesting launch which involves the entire school community. This public commencement can help to motivate the readers and build the interest of non-members. In this commencement programme the librarians need to work with the school administrators to make

this a special day. A motivational speaker can be used at the launch of the programme so that they can motivate and challenge group members to remain in the programme. Group members can be given an opportunity to state their reasons for joining the Literature Circle and encourage other students to join. The first set of books to be read can be attractively displayed and if possible have the authors talk about their book.

The value of the programme

According to Schlick (1999), literature circles provide a way for students to engage in critical thinking and reflection as they read, discuss, and respond to books. Schlick further added that collaboration is the heart of this approach and that student reshape and add onto their understanding as they construct meaning with other readers. Schlick also explains that literature circles guide students to deeper understanding of what they read through structured discussion and extended written and artistic response.

Student who are involved in this program improve their ability to negotiate the opportunities and risk of the Internet Age (Educause 2006). This means that readers' information literacy skills are being developed as they participate in learning how to use technology in creative ways. This article also mentioned that Facebook has the potential to teach students about appropriate citizenship in the online world. Like many emerging Internet applications, Facebook also emphasizes the importance of creating content over simply consuming it (Educause 2006). Using Facebook with the literature circle will allow students to express themselves in written form.

The configuration of Facebook is able to motivate a community of readers as it provides interaction and gives individuals equal access to discussion which is very useful in providing scaffolding for anyone who does not possess a high linguistic ability. As users read and post their responses to the literature, they will improve their literacy skills. According to Collins (1993), critical thinking is encouraged when the reader is actively and constructively engaged in the process of reading especially when it is done personally and collaboratively as students who read, write, discuss, and interact with a variety of learning materials in a variety of ways are more likely to become critical thinkers.

How these roles can help improve users' literacy skills

The roles indicated are important literacy skills that students are required to master in any educational institution. Creating a scholarly environment where readers can perform these roles will help them to master specific literacy skills in a timely manner. Because they are concentrating on one role at a time and collaborating with others while doing so, it is likely that the skills they learn will be fully grasped. By the end of the programme all readers should possess the literacy skills that were emphasized.

Learning in this environment helps students to contribute information while it supports collaborative and reflective learning. Through constant exposure students are able to build and manage their network (Aberdour 2007).

Reaching students with Facebook

It is easy to use Facebook to reach students because of its popularity. Facebook.com reported that in April 2008, there were 70 million active users. According to Hagel and Brown(2008) many of these are students and recent graduates. Since so many students are interacting with their peers using this network it would be an excellent idea for librarians to capitalize on using it to enhance learning and literacy. An article in Educause Learning Initiative (2006) stated that:

> any technology that is able to captivate so many student
> for so much time not only carries implications for
> how those students view the world but also offers an
> opportunity for educators to understand the elements
> of social networking that students find so compelling
> and to incorporate these elements into teaching and learning (p. 2).

The article further mentioned that a Facebook profile is an excellent mechanism for communicating with our students because it allows librarians to go where students already are; it is an environment that students are already comfortable with. Librarians joining and participating in Facebook have the power to be just as significant to today's students as meeting them for coffee or lunch was to previous generations. Students are already actively using these messaging systems, perhaps even more frequently than they use traditional email or instant messaging; therefore, their presence in the social network environment makes library services and librarian assistance extremely convenient. In addition, Farkas (2007) in her article about Facebook perceives these sites as another way to reach out to patrons. Farkas (2007) supported this idea when she stated that "It makes sense to look at what social networking sites our patrons frequent and how we can provide services there". By doing this librarians will be involving their users in learning through social networks which facilitate social learning. Mack et al (2007) stated that librarians at Penn State have found that since they have created and promoted their own Facebook profiles during instruction sessions and reference interactions, they have seen increased research assistance requests in not only their Facebook message boxes, but also in their institutional email and even in person (p.1).

Evaluation

Formative as well as summative evaluation needs to be done in relation to the objectives set at the beginning of the programme. The formative evaluation will ensure that objectives of the Literature Circle are being met and to determine if changes are to be made to further improve the intended outcomes. Summative evaluation which is carried out at the end of the programme is extremely necessary. This will let the librarian know if the objectives of the programmes were met and if not what changes needs to be done if the programme is to continue for another period of time. The librarian will evaluate the readers' performance to see how well each individual and groups did on the learning tasks. The result of the evaluation will help to determine what adjustments are needed to achieve the objectives should the programme be continued (Bertner and Shelton 2006).

Conclusion

It can be concluded that Facebook is a popular social utility that is widely used among students in high schools. Some librarians have seen the need to use this utility as an educational tool because it facilitates social learning. They believe in the philosophy of using what students are interested in to teach them. As such Facebook can be used to develop students' literacy skills in an environment that promotes interaction, and individual accountability. The result of this strategy is that scaffolding is offered for students who are not linguistically strong. The librarian can do formative evaluation to ensure that the objectives are met throughout the programme. In addition to this, summative evaluation is necessary to make adjustments should the librarian wish to restart programme with another group or the same group. Of importance, school libraries need to remain on the cutting-edge so that they will remain the hub of their institution at all times.

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Statement of Originality

This statement certifies that the paper above is based upon original research undertaken by the author and that the paper was conceived and written by the author(s) alone and has not been published elsewhere. All information and

ideas from others is referenced. The photographs that appear on the Facebook profile on pages 7 and 12 are that of myself. I have no objection if they should be published within this article.