

Should We Turn Our Backs On Facebook?

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At the turn of the century MirandaNet Fellows were advising Oracle, one of the global internet giants, on a software platform for children called Think.com. Oracle's American CEO, Larry Ellison, had sunk \$14,000 of his own charity funds into this because he saw it as a vehicle for children to make friends all around the world promoting world peace. This is a study in how brilliant inventions fail.

Think.com fitted in well with The MirandaNet Fellowship commitment to school exchange projects that we had been running since the 1980s. Superceding letters posted to penfriends, we had already been supporting the exchanging of information through our charity World Ecitizens¹ website, promoting pupils' video clips and web publications linked to curriculum impetus that the teacher would oversee and collate. In effect, the children became web authors writing and videoing content. Of course, much went wrong when trying to liaise digitally between countries. Setting up our first video link with Australian schools, for example, took hours and there was only a short time spot to communicate because of the time zones. At last the two classes could see each other. We stared and waved. Oops. We had not planned what to say and were quite overwhelmed by the novelty. We soon worked out what worked best, of course, and these exchanges became fruitful and illuminating.

International Curriculum Exchange

One of our Fellows, Marion Scott Baker, Head of Cheam School, Newbury, describes her first foray into international exchange. She had been a reluctant convert to the use of digital technologies, but this project changed her views about their value. "My real awakening was when I realized the potential of the internet for bringing learning to life. My exchanges with other countries started when I worked with an American teacher on a data collection project that broadened the children's learning in a very real way. Mainly by exchanging emails they researched topics on homes, food and thanksgiving, fascinated by the lifestyle differences between the two countries. We ran parallel cookery classes and each class produced a cookery book for their friends across the Pond. We read to each other on cassette tapes and exchanged tapes of country dance and square dance music. We got to know each other. The excitement in learning was palpable. One incident I remember is when the children could not understand why they could not talk to their American friends on Skype in the morning: I tried to explain about time zones. The children retrieved an old and dusty globe from the cupboard and I used a torch to show them how the sun moves around the earth. I have since continued similar project between the schools and the Podar schools in India (Scott-Baker, Kaur and Preston 2011). I am now keen to extend our international work because I believe in the value for the pupils".

¹Worlddecitizens.org.uk

International work has prompted systemic change in our school as well. In administration there is no doubt about the difference the internet has made to making the administration of software easier for the individual teacher who used to maintain their own library of programmes that they largely bought themselves (Preston and Scott Baker 2014)."

Developing Think.com

Because the MirandaNet Fellows, like Marion, already had extensive experience of internet exchange in the early days, our organisations was chosen to advise on Think.com. Nevertheless, this platform had reached a level of sophistication we had not yet encountered: an all embracing digital environment with bells and whistles to be explored. Yet as teachers we found it very hard to understand what children would wish to publish on their Think.com web page. Facebook was not yet established in the national consciousness. Of course since the teachers could not quite understand the point in those early days, for the children it felt rather like a homework task. Nevertheless, each pupil involved gradually built up a page of their activities, hobbies and news for other pupils to 'like'. Some of the pupils became very keen on this way of communicating, surprisingly not always the most confident face to face in class.

But Oracle software engineers in San Francisco failed to understand the rhythms of the school terms in England. When the Think.com teachers went back to school in September after the summer in 2002 they found that all the pupils' web pages of carefully curated work had been wiped.

"Oh yes," the Head Programmer "told me. We sent the teachers an email on July 30th to say we were developing a new version and to tell us to save any work they wanted before August 15th. No one did this. We did not think to check why."

"Hum", I said, "Possibly because this was the teachers' holiday and you send the message on their school email? None of them have email at home! They were on their summer holiday." The teachers and the children were furious because they had to start again.

But start again they did, and soon there was enough activity to prompt us to consider e-safety rules. In our naivety we thought we would filter doubtful words. But Mrs Cockermouth was furious when the first four letters of her name were asterisked and we lost all the schools in Essex. So then we decided to teach personal responsibility and agreed a ban on using computers for a week in response to poor online behaviour. With 4,000 users world-wide we never had to use this threat. We still believe that children must be taught to regulate their own behaviour. If this does not happen in schools who else will teach them - Google? Facebook? Surely this is now part of the cultural offering that a school should make to its charges?

E-safety was not a big issue because Think.com was a closed platform and all the participants were known. But by about 2003 concerns were developing about adult paedophiles on line and Oracle decided to take the teachers out of the mix. Of course, without the teachers motivating them, most of the children stopped using the platform. Finally, Oracle developers converted the platform to a kind of information treasure hunt by putting up swathes of context and prompting the children to follow a line through the resource called a Thinkquest. But this really was not linked to pupils' interests and curriculum needs eventually Thinkquest died too. The technology had been developed, but the human need for this platform was not clear. With the change in the curriculum in England in 2014 Oracle like the other giants, Google and Microsoft now put their charity funds into Computer Science in schools - this marketing strategy clearly avoids tackling the issues of Digital Literacy and Digital safety. I wonder why.

Should we leave Facebook?

Only when I started to use Facebook in 2006 did I understand the power and potential of Think.com and realised how 'before its time' this platform was. I enjoy watching the exploits of my friends, colleague and relatives all over the world. In particular, I keep up with close relatives in the US and Australia. Now that many of my cousins are at retiring age they treat us to amazing views of the countries they live in and visit. Most of my colleagues, travel widely to speak at conferences and they know how to take a picture that is worth 1,000 words. Currently MirandaNet director, Sarah Younie, is working with poor communities in India on the subject of hygiene. The photos she sends on Facebook of smiling children in huts surrounded by a sea of mud are heart rending. The important lesson that has to be learned is that, 'Dirt carries germs'. This short message is saving lives and creating a future for these children. But the dangers are clear. Most of the students Sarah took with her from England suffered with stomach bugs because of the unhygienic environment.

But Facebook is also entertaining. Many of my Facebook book 'friends' have gone through a phase of sending pithy mottos and fun observations about life in general. Our age begins to show. I also noticed that if I look at a dress on the M&S website or shoes in FitFlop these clothes that I have lingered over but not bought start to appear in Facebook thus tempting me to buy them again although I have resisted the temptation once already. I began to understand the power of an algorithm is and how my behaviour on line can be turned to the advantage of the sellers of goods and services. "Never do any quizzes on line", I was told because you are actually providing information about your habits, inclinations, buying preferences and even political attitudes".

Slowly political messages have started to appear in my Facebook newsfeed. I have never had any pro-Brexit messages – they are all Remain. So clearly the range of my social contacts give Facebook a clear steer on my political opinions. I have also never had a message praising Boris. Is it good for democracy that I only get the propaganda from one side?

I have also asked for trouble by sharing messages that amused me. On one occasion I found I had sent a photo and content about Remain that was 'fake news'. I had to apologise to my 'friends'. I no longer send these political messages on.

To avoid the public nature of Facebook, many of my friends are now using WhatsApp. This also is owned by Facebook, but is closed to invited groups. A lot of politicians now use it to communicate within factions because it cannot so easily be hacked.

But WhatsApp this does not give me the range of information I gain from Facebook. I know many principled friends and colleagues are leaving on principle. But I feel I will forgo much innocent pleasure if I bail out too. I know I am being weak!

References to follow

https://www.tes.com/news/we-must-put-humans-heart-edtech?fb_action_ids=10157276956247152&fb_action_types=og.comments&fbclid=IwAR1ES2r9sith9typuUmjhuOQHuenLLqsUzJ_Iter5Ux0E3CyPXs8AEhq7z8