

Should Students Use Their Real Names on the Web?

Yes

Educators have been insisting that students not use their real names online for several years now due to the mistaken notion that if we hide their identities, we are protecting them. In fact, quite the opposite is true for a couple of reasons.

The first is that we are giving the kids a false sense of security. They think that because no one knows who they are, they can post whatever they want. As a result, they are posting all sorts of things without thinking about the consequences of their actions, including cruel comments about others. The real issue with this is that if any questionable content they publish online should go

viral, it is likely that someone who knows them will see it and share it with their local peer group, which could have a devastating effect on self-esteem and personal relationships.

Pseudonyms don't actually protect the kids either. With web 2.0 technology, online predators don't actu-



David Wees

No

The fatal error people make when discussing educational practices is to think of children as mini adults. I doubt many adults in the world would want their digital footprints or portfolios to include their writings and drawings from fifth grade. Kids grow up at different rates, and the question of whether or not to publish under your true identity is a very adult decision. That's why anonymity should be the default setting until a student is ready and decides to claim his or her digital work for a footprint.

Cybersafety experts, such as the investigators at the Jefferson County District Attorney's Office (www.co.jefferson.co.us/da/da_T99_R78.htm) in my area,

do presentations at our schools all the time. Their experiences are valid and many. They realize that students are vulnerable in many situations and caution that children must learn basic sensibilities to keep them as safe as possible. They advise us that we should avoid connecting a name, a picture, and a location.



Dan Maas

ally have to be from the local neighbourhood to have a negative impact on children. They can just prowl the internet from any location and look for kids to prey on. Just because the kids have a pseudonym doesn't mean they run a smaller risk of being contacted by these predators. We could have a whole different discussion about whether the actual risk of kids being exposed to online predators is very high, but that aside, once the kids connect to a predator through social media, having a pseudonym doesn't protect them from the social engineering tricks these people use to get kids to give up their personal information and locations.

Second, the rewards of a student sharing his or her work outweighs the risks involved. Kids who have built up a repertoire of their exemplary work online are going to find it far easier to find a job once they leave school.

Critics will cry out that this will hardly assure student safety. True enough. Telling kids not to talk to strangers will also fall short of making certain a child is safe from abduction or other harm. But we tell them anyway, not because that one behavior is the silver bullet for child safety, but because it can help improve the situation and lower the odds. The same is true for online anonymity. It is certainly possible for a person intent on harm to use masked online information to find a child, but let's make their work as difficult as possible.

It is important to teach kids to stay anonymous and tell them why we want them to do so. After discussions on cybersafety that included the reasons why we try to keep students fairly anonymous online, I have overheard students remarking that they needed to change their Facebook or Twitter accounts at home.

We also teach kids that it is OK to hide online, when really one of our objectives for education should be to teach them how to be good communicators. Communication between people is much more effective when the whole person is involved in the discussion.

We have a very talented artist at my school who produced a masterful five-minute anime cartoon for her personal project in school. This work could very likely lead her to a whole career in graphic and animation design before she even finishes school!

We also teach kids that it is OK to hide online, when really one of our objectives for education should be to teach them how to be good communicators. Communication between people is much more effective when the whole person is involved in the discussion. Ever notice that the anonymous comments on YouTube and blogs are always worse than the ones that are connected to a real name? Similarly, anonymous letters to the

editor in newspapers are always far more negative than letters people have signed their names to.

Instead of hiding kids behind pseudonyms online, we should encourage them to post their work openly and publicly so the world can see. This way, students will learn how to appropriately navigate the web with our assistance and will be much less likely to post inappropriate material.

—David Wees has taught mathematics in the United States, England, Thailand, and Canada. He co-authored a textbook, has a master's of educational technology from the University of British Columbia, and is an educational technologist at Stratford Hall, a private school located in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. You can find his blog at <http://davidwees.com>.

Kids grow up at different rates, and the question of whether or not to publish under your true identity is a very adult decision. That's why anonymity should be the default setting until a student is ready and decides to claim his or her digital work for a footprint.

An important caveat is that students' identities should be hidden only from outside individuals. Teachers and peers should know exactly who has written a post so they are accountable for their interactions. This is where naming procedures—ways students and teachers can know each other without divulging their identities to outsiders—become useful. Identity protection is a critical 21st century skill.

Once a child reaches adolescence and is ready to assume a digital footprint, I'm all for full disclosure. But it should be their choice. I use my full name on my LinkedIn, Twitter, and Facebook accounts. When students ask me about that, I have a chance to explain what a digital footprint is and why I want one.

The bottom line for me is that school is a place where kids can grow up making mistakes without having to pay penalties for them for the rest of their lives. Plunging them into the deep end of full identity disclosure for the purpose of creating a digital footprint ignores the developmental needs of children. So keep kids reasonably anonymous until they are ready to behave like adults, because a digital footprint is a very adult concept.

—Dan Maas, EdD, is the chief information officer for Littleton Public Schools in Littleton, Colorado, USA. He led the implementation of more than 5,000 Linux-based netbooks and districtwide Google services in a literacy initiative titled "Inspired Writing." You can visit his blog at <http://lps2.it/blogs>.