



VALERIE STEEVES

Teaching in a Fishbowl

How surveillance is reshaping the networked classroom

In 2011-2013, as part of MediaSmarts' *Young Canadians in a Wired World Project*¹, I had the pleasure of talking to 10 key informant teachers across the country about using technology as a learning tool. We also interviewed 66 students and 21 parents in Calgary, Toronto and Ottawa. One of the biggest surprises was the number of times surveillance came up.

Surveillance in the classroom certainly isn't a new phenomenon. Teachers have supervised students' interactions, monitored their progress, reported on their behavioural problems and generally kept an eye of them since the advent of the modern school. But our research participants were increasingly uneasy with the unexpected ways that networked technologies are changing the classroom experience.

The most common problem was the inability to access educational materials because school filters shut down access to a variety of platforms and content. For example, a math teacher was unable to use Twitter to help elementary students work through math problems collaboratively because his school banned the site. Teachers teaching art and media in Ontario and Quebec had similar problems because their schools wouldn't allow classroom computers to connect to YouTube.

The inability to access high-quality learning materials wasn't only frustrating for these teachers, it also sent a clear message that the

school administration didn't trust them to deal with content in an appropriate way. This was perplexing, especially because they dealt with difficult issues in the classroom on an ongoing basis. Although they agreed that students shouldn't have "free rein" online, they also felt that restricting access — to the Internet, to smart phones, or to other devices like iPods and iPads — wasn't the answer. As one

teacher summarized, "instead of blocking it, [we should be] finding a way to talk about it and then actually having an open discussion and figuring out what's right and what's wrong, what's appropriate and what's not."

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Certainly the students we spoke to were equally frustrated by access restrictions. Although they knew a variety of ways to get around school filters, they

felt that the routine and pervasive surveillance they experienced at school was both misguided and invasive. They understood that some limits made sense. As one 11-12 year old in Calgary explained, "I understand... why we can't do Facebook, like, if we're trying to... search up stuff for like homework, they don't really want us talking to our friends in India, that would be distracting". However, the monitoring they experienced was so extensive that it frequently meant they couldn't complete school assignments, even when teachers had pre-selected the sites they were to visit.

They also felt that sites were often banned for spurious reasons. One teenager recounted a story about her school blocking access to *edukids* because the site included the words "education slash learning." Other students were unable to access sites that contained the word "stupid." And a number of students reported that their Board even blocked its *own* site because students were posting photos that were unrelated to their school work. All of this left them convinced that school policies were "dumb" and "useless."

But, from their point of view, the real problem was again a lack of trust. Rather than helping them learn how to interact with each

other in a positive way online, they felt that school administrators assumed they would behave inappropriately and used surveillance to either make it impossible for them to communicate or to hold them to account if they said anything the administration didn't like. Every focus group we conducted was replete with examples of schools policing students' interactions and either creating or escalating problems by over-reacting. One particularly evocative example occurred in a Toronto middle school. Two girls were catching up with each other after March break. When one commented that her skin was darker than her friend's, playfully rubbing in the fact she had a tan because she spent the break in Florida, their parents were called and the school threatened both students with suspension for racist bullying.

This lack of trust also meant that the students we talked to were less likely to ask teachers for help when they *did* experience difficulties online. They assumed that, if they talked to a teacher they trusted and asked for help, the principal would be told and the police would be called in. In order to avoid losing more control over a situation they already found difficult, they wouldn't take the risk of reaching out.

And yet teachers are ideally placed to help students learn how to handle online conflict, especially when they are able to access networked media in the classroom without filtering or other forms of monitoring. One of my favourite examples came from a high school teacher who wanted his students to participate in an online forum. To help them learn how to respond to rude or insulting comments, he set up an Intranet in his classroom and the students talked to each other as they went about their day. When someone said something that annoyed or bothered another student, the class discussed it and came up with their own rules about online etiquette. We also had an elementary teacher who took her students on a popular play site so they could learn about online privacy. Another elementary teacher used instant messaging so her class could learn how to respond to online conflict and harassment.

But the real benefit of having unmonitored access to networked media in the classroom is that teachers are there to help students when they encounter problems. One of the secondary teachers we spoke to recounted how one of his students came across a hate site while the class was working on an assignment. Instead of blocking it, the

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teacher used it as an opportunity to engage the class in a discussion about online content:

I actually had the kids look at it — when my lightbulb went off theirs hadn't yet. They didn't know what they were looking at. I asked them to look a little closer, and some of them started to see it and others still couldn't. And that interested them, because I could see something they couldn't. That was a way for them to see, for them to get interested in the idea that somebody was actually preaching hatred and it didn't even feel like it.

This kind of unmonitored communication between teacher and student helps to create the trust that is central to classroom learning. As one secondary teacher put it, "it takes a lot of energy to create a moment of learning ... Learning is about connecting what you don't know to what you do know and making a new connection, and that connection has to be reinforced. It's a teacher's job to help students see and make those connections."

Surveillance makes it more difficult for students to make those connections, because it makes it more difficult to build relationships of trust between teachers and administrators, and between teachers and students. If we want to fully harness the potential of networked communications as a learning tool, we need to go beyond quick fixes like filtering and develop policies that promote a healthy and respectful learning environment.

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ENDNOTES

1. For the full reports on the project, see <http://mediasmarts.ca/research-policy>.

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