

March 2008

Virtue In Action

Social networking for social change

VIRTUE IN ACTION

FOSTERING CITIZENSHIP THROUGH CHARACTER EDUCATION



*"How Social
Networking sites
are evolving
into powerful tools
for social change"*

Social Networking For Social Change



“HOW SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES ARE EVOLVING INTO POWERFUL TOOLS FOR SOCIAL CHANGE”

Social networking sites allow many young people to create a virtual home away from home on the Web. Facebook users can update their “friends” on how they’re feeling, send them gifts, track birthdays or change photos to reflect the latest and most exciting aspects of their lives.

MySpace users too add and rank their friends, broadcast their favorite music through **customizable** players and express their personalities through vivid, colorful themes called “skins.”

But there is another **emerging** aspect to social networking that goes well beyond their sharing, photo-posting, and instant communication **applications**. Increasingly, sites like Facebook, MySpace, mass-IM tool Twitter and others are being **leveraged** to raise awareness of needs in our world, raise money to address these needs and to affect social change. Technology engineers and businessmen too are using their knowledge and skills **wisely** to create new, more **robust** tools that enable easier charitable giving, social organization and awareness building online.

These online pages and tools – intended for fun, entertainment and keeping in touch – are helping young people find their voice and speak out for what they believe is right. In this lesson, we will see several examples of how regular individuals driven by **compassion** and living **generously** are making a difference beyond their wildest dreams. In the hands of concerned young citizens, social networking is **evolving** into a powerful tool for social change.

Facebook Group Takes on Terrorism

A Facebook group is an online community, often formed in support of television programs, like “Curb Your Enthusiasm,” or “Heroes,” as well as movies, celebrities and even the Nintendo Wii system. It can have as few as one member or as many as one million, and new groups spring up every day, posting information and launching discussion threads about hot topics. But one Facebook group recently found itself in the pages of history.

Engineering student Oscar Morales, 33, started a group called “A million voices against the FARC.” Since 1964, an armed group called the Revolutionary Armed Forces,

VIRTUE IN ACTION

or FARC, has brutalized the people of Colombia, a nation on the northern coast of South America. The FARC –considered a terrorist organization by the governments of Colombia, the United States, and 29 other countries – has enacted a wave of assassinations against Colombian elected leaders, judges and lawyers, policemen, journalists and ordinary citizens. The group is currently holding up to 740 hostages, some for longer than a decade. The FARC also generates massive profits from the illegal drug trade. Due to the wave of terrorism and also violence enacted by private armed groups fighting the FARC, Ecuador alone has taken in 250,000 refugees from Colombia.

Despite this **heinous** reputation, the organization has operated with moderate public outcry from Colombian citizens other than a July 2002 protest waged by 20,000 Colombian women. But this year, Morales – and his Facebook group –banded together in a compelling act of **unity** that resulted in the largest protest march in the country’s history.

How did he do it? After Morales started the group, he took advantage of Facebook’s powerful networks and popularity. His friends joined the anti-FARC Facebook group, spread the word to their online friends, and a month later, Morales counted 277,000 supporters. That’s when he took the Web fight to the real world. After establishing **solidarity**, a sense of unity of purpose, with his virtual companions, Morales and others planned a national protest.

In a Council of the Americas article, “Democracy’s New Tool,” Morales commented, “We thought we’d just end up like other groups on Facebook.” Felipe Echeverri, one of the students who joined forces with Morales, told MediaShift about how the group began. “Someone creates it and it just sits there. So we created the ‘Un Milion’ [group], and all of the group members started putting the logo on their Facebook profiles, and sending out invitations to their friends. This helped refine the idea and make the group grow.”

On Feb. 4, over 4 million Colombians marched in approximately 27 cities through the country and 104 major cities worldwide, according to an International Tribune article which reported that marchers shouted: “No more kidnappings! No more lies! No more deaths! No more FARC!” To put this in perspective, the 4 million marchers worldwide represented at least 10% of Colombia’s population, estimated at about 45 million, according to the most recent world census data.

Even those who helped make the event happen were surprised by their level of success in **elevating** the human rights crisis to international attention. An urban planner who marched in Paris, Marta Arango, told the International Tribune that the organizing and communication process helped younger generations understand the importance of standing up for important causes.

“Individuals are feeling they play a role in the conflict,” Arango told the International Tribune. “We did not need a big institution to organize our civil population.”

Clicking Against Genocide and Hunger

There are numerous examples of how social networkers have aided the fight against genocide in the Darfur region of Sudan.



istockphoto.com

The African country has been embroiled in conflict since 2003 as a result of a government-sponsored genocide that has killed an estimated 200,000 people and displaced another 2.5 million in refugee camps. The cause has **galvanized** young people in all parts of the United States, and some have taken action by using tools

including Facebook, MySpace and the instant-message application Twitter. Massachusetts teens, Rebecca Glickman-Simon and Alexandria Giacalone leveraged Facebook.com to publicize a school dance and raise \$14,000 in proceeds to help Darfur.

“Nobody should ever have to suffer through that and have family members suffer like that” Glickman-Simon told the GateHouse News Service. The teen said the Darfur crisis reminded her of relatives that perished in the Holocaust. We have to do as much as we can to prevent it from happening again.”

In Arkansas, a college student used MySpace to address the suffering in Darfur. Dallas Harris, then 26, last year founded Feed Just One, a page where he raised awareness of the situation, and also publicized fund-raising events and sold cause-related merchandise. Harris collected 9,000 friends and raised approximately

\$5,000, which was used to send 130,000 meals that were then shipped to the Sudan, Haiti, Cambodia and other countries seeking aid for malnourished and starving children. “I wanted to do more than donate what little I had each month,” Harris said, explaining why he didn’t opt for the typical adopt-a-child program advertised on TV.

Another college student, in Massachusetts, also raised awareness for the Sudanese tragedy, organizing protests and encouraging college endowments and pension plans to sell their investments in companies considered indirect contributors to the war. “It spawned from joining Facebook groups and posting things,” 21-year-old Brandon Sabbag told BusinessWeek. “Facebook is the platform that allows us to make social change and realistic things happen.”

Technology and Wisdom Enabling Altruism

Also worthy of attention are those whose **compassion** for others led them to use their knowledge of technology **wisely** in creating tools that allow us to connect with and help others. Sean Parker – friend of the CEO of Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg – developed Causes, now considered the site’s most powerful application for social causes. Causes – which notifies users when their friend joins a cause or

donates money-- creates what BusinessWeek described as “a kind of **altruistic** peer pressure.”

“We’re putting tools into the hands of individuals to mobilize their friends and ultimately build social and political movements,” Parker, 27, told BusinessWeek. Since Causes started, 27,000 Facebook Causes have been created. It also allows recipients of donations to respond to supporters in a faster, more personal way. “I can see who made a donation and I can say ‘thank you’ on Facebook,” Lindsay O’Neill, a development officer at Brigham and Women’s Hospital, told BusinessWeek. “It really helps to foster that connected feeling.”

As Sudan-activist Sabbag indicates, the importance of online tools in the aforementioned examples cannot be denied. However, it is equally essential to remember that these movements might have died on the vine had young people not moved beyond merely posting their outrage or opinions about national and world events online. In all of the cases, from the Colombian engineering student to the Arkansas and Massachusetts college students raising money and awareness, these individuals turned their **compassion** into action, **mobilizing** others and making a measurable difference.

Vocabulary

CUSTOMIZABLE: capable of being personalized and modified to order

EMERGING: to come forth into view or notice

APPLICATIONS: A computer program with an interface, enabling people to use the computer as a tool to accomplish a specific task. Word processing, spreadsheet, and communications software are all examples of applications

LEVERAGED: power or ability to act or to influence people, events, decisions, etc

WISDOM: ability to apply knowledge, experience, understanding in ways that are effective and good. The ability to discern or judge what is true, right, or lasting

ROBUST: strong and healthy; hardy; vigorous



COMPASSION: feelings of sympathy for the distress of others, with the desire to help

GENEROSITY: giving freely of our own possessions, time and or talent to someone else

EVOLVING: to develop gradually
Heinous: hateful; odious; abominable; totally reprehensible

Unity: the state of being one; oneness

SOLIDARITY: a shared common interest; active loyalty within a group

ELEVATING: to move or raise to a higher place or position

GALVANIZE: arouse to awareness or action; spur

MOBILIZE: To assemble, marshal, or coordinate for a purpose

ALTRUISTIC: unselfishly concerned for or devoted to the welfare of others

Virtue In Action

Social networking for social change

VIRTUE IN ACTION

FOSTERING CITIZENSHIP THROUGH CHARACTER EDUCATION

Lesson Goals:

- Develop understanding of the virtues of compassion, generosity, solidarity and wisdom
- Inspire students to live out these virtues by showing them real-life examples of young men and women – some in elementary school – who take on large causes using limited, but highly effective resources
- Help students see how technology can be harnessed, not only to make their own lives easier, but to ease the burdens of others and fight for worthy causes
- Increase students awareness of the suffering of the people of Colombia and Darfur

Discussion Question Options:

1. How is social networking being leveraged to aid charitable causes?
2. What is FARC, and why was a Facebook group formulated against it? How did the anti-FARC group make history?
3. Do you think it's possible in America for social networking sites addressing a charitable or social cause to mobilize 10% of our country's population? What are some ideas for needs or causes that would potentially mobilize this many people?
3. How did the Massachusetts teens use Facebook to help Darfur? What was their inspiration?
4. Why do you think Facebook groups and MySpace pages are so appealing to young people in terms of joining charitable causes?
5. Do you think that social networking for charitable causes is a fad? What do you think could keep young people interested in using social networks to raise social awareness?
6. How would you define wisdom? How has wisdom been lived out in the evolution of social networking sites addressing charitable causes?

Journal Writing Options:

1. Write about whether you have ever used a social networking site to donate or raise awareness for, a charitable cause? If yes, explain what you did. If not, describe a cause that you would like to try and impact through social networking.
2. If you have participated in a march, fundraising effort or

other charitable activity, write about how technology could have helped the endeavor.

Extended Learning Activities:

1. Break the students into groups and have them come up with a plan to help an agreed-upon cause using MySpace or Facebook. Have them explain what they would do – aside from starting a group – to help affect change or draw awareness to their efforts. They could suggest things such as a dance, a bake sale, a march, a sit-in, etc.
2. Have students break into small groups and research/analyze the Facebook application, Causes, and present to the class on how it came about, how it helps, and also potential harmful effects of such networking, if any.
3. Organize students into teams and ask them to create a class presentation on the history and present-day situation of the situation in Darfur and terrorism in Colombia.

Internet Resources:**Background on FARC:**

<http://www.turnerlearning.com/cnn/soldiers/background.html>

Background on Darfur conflict:

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/5316306.stm>

“One By One: Farmington Man’s Charity Organization Seeks to Feed the World’s Starving Children,” Kevin Kinder, Northwest Arkansas Times

<http://nwanews.com/nwat/Living/62337/print/>

“Students Use Facebook to Raise \$13K to Combat Genocide in Darfur,”

Kathy Uek, GateHouse News Service

<http://www.metrowestdailynews.com/archive/x469077587>

“Facebook-ing Philanthropy,” Brian Braiker, Newsweek

<http://www.newsweek.com/id/62168>

“Click Here to Save Darfur,” Catherine Holahan, BusinessWeek

<http://www.newsweek.com/id/62168>

“Facebook Becomes Catalyst for Causes, Colombian FARC Protest,” Jennifer Woodard Maderazo, MediaShift

http://www.pbs.org/mediashift/2008/02/socialgood_networkingfacebook.html