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Will You Be My Friend?

Michael Simonson

We all know what it means to be a friend. We learn early in life that, as Emerson said, "the only way to have a friend is to be one." A friend is a person admired, respected, whose company is enjoyed.

The idea of friends has recently changed, however, at least in social networking applications. According to Boyd and Ellison (2007), social networks are Web-based services that allow persons to construct a public or semipublic profile within a system, to articulate a list of other users with whom they share connections, and view and move through a list of links made by themselves and others. Most often these locations are called "social networking sites." Social network sites such as MySpace and Facebook have attracted millions of participants who blog, share messages, post photos and videos, and list their friends, all in personally constructed profiles.

To participate in a social network site a user constructs a profile and by this act the social networker becomes real in a virtual world. They "type oneself into being," as Suden (2003) stated. One characteristic of most social networking sites is the listing of friends; friending. Social networkers name those they want to list as friends, and in most cases the request to be a friend requires an affirmative response. Some sites even allow top eight or top 10 lists of friends; as Boyd (2006) said, "in a culture where it is socially awkward to reject someone's Friendship, ranking them provides endless drama and social awkwardness" (p. 11).

Many who study the phenomena of social networking refer to the idea of Web 2.0, a trend in the use of the Internet and Web that is based on collaboration and information sharing. Web 2.0 is not a new network, nor a thing. Web 2.0 is an idea in people's heads, based on the interaction
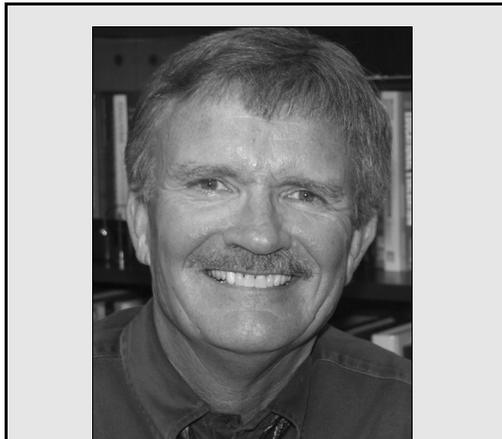
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between the user and provider. Examples are eBay, Wikipedia, Skype, and Craigslist.

So, what does this all mean to the distance educator? Certainly it is nice to have friends, even virtual ones, and social networks seem to have reached the point of "critical mass" and are here to stay, at least until a new innovative use of the Web evolves.

The importance of social networking makes the concept important to distance educators. At the least, a modest understanding of social networking is a must for distance educators. And, it is likely that more depth of understanding will be needed. The taxonomy of social networking for distance learning might look like this:

• Level 1: Learning about social networks—definitions, history, background, and examples.
• Level 2: Designing for social networks—profiling, blogging, wiki-ing, and friending.
• Level 3: Studying social networks—ethics, uses, misuses, policing, and supporting.

• Level 4: Learning from and with social networks—social networks for teaching and learning, science, research, and theory building.

And finally, maybe we do not need to worry about solitary learners poised in front of a computer. Obviously they want friends, just as the child on the playground does. Virtual friends perhaps, but in many cases true friends. And, for all those social networkers out there, remember the old saying, "we are known by our friends!"

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