Returning from a conference on a flight from Dallas, I was struck by how, on a seemingly daily basis, we witness accounts of people altering conventional practices and connecting in new ways using emerging web-enabled technologies. As e-books outsell hard covers by over 40%, I should not have been surprised by Delta passengers tapping into the free Wi-Fi via their iPads and reading electronic book titles layered with links to extra content such as videos, the author’s spoken commentary, and increasingly, social reading options, such as note-sharing, social highlighting, real-time book discussions, ratings, tags, and links to Facebook and Twitter (Watters, 2010).

We are witnessing similar trends in education. In the last 10 years, Internet access, the nature of the web, and contexts for learning have been transformed, and new desired competencies for learners, teachers, and administrators have emerged. Such shifts have impacted constructs for learning, instruction, and paths for future research (Greenhow, Robelia, & Hughes, 2009a, 2009b). Internet-connectivity in schools, homes, neighborhoods, and communities has become increasingly pervasive, enabling expanded sites for formal and informal learning. Moreover, technological advancements have contributed increasingly to young people’s adoption of social media, a term often used interchangeably with Web 2.0, to refer to online applications which promote users, their interconnections, and user-generated content (Barnes, 2006; Cormode & Krishnamurthy, 2008). Ninety percent of school-aged youth now use the Internet regularly, with over 75% of adolescents aged 12 to 17 using social media (DeBell & Chapman, 2006; Lenhart, Arafah, Smith, & Macgill, 2008; Lenhart, Madden, & Hitlin, 2005).
Examples of social media include social network sites like MySpace, Facebook, and Ning; here I use the term social network sites to refer to web-enabled services that feature prominent personal profiling, the ability to make one’s social connections transparent, and the ability to view and traverse the networks of one’s friends (boyd & Ellison, 2007). Some argue that social network sites are used predominantly to connect with those one already knows and less for traditional “networking” purposes (boyd & Ellison, 2007). Others prefer the term social networking sites and point to sites such as LinkedIn (www.linkedin.com) which are used primarily for “networking” or building one’s list of personal contacts. I use these terms interchangeably and define social network sites as web-based services through which individuals can maintain existing ties and develop new social ties with people outside their network (Greenhow & Robelia, 2009b).

Beyond social network sites, other examples of social media include media sharing like YouTube and Flickr; social bookmarking such as Delicious and CiteULike; collaborative knowledge development through wikis; creative works like blogs and microblogging (e.g., Twitter, Blogger); content aggregation and organization such as RSS feeds and tagging tools; and re-mixing or mash-ups of content from different content providers into new forms.

Conceptually, social media seem to embody social constructivist views of knowledge as decentralized, accessible, and co-constructed by and among a broad base of users (Greenhow et al., 2009a). Colleges and universities especially are seeking to employ social media for their informational and educational goals (Kaya, 2010; Parry, 2010; Parry & Young, 2010). Witness the recent crop of so-called “social-learning sites” that aim to link students’ Face-booking habits with note-taking and sharing in formal educational courses (Parry & Young, 2010). Unfortunately, these efforts seem to perpetuate the walled-off classrooms, content management and delivery systems model, and traditional views of knowledge as controlled and expert-driven that newer web technologies seem designed to subvert. They miss the even greater educational potential of using social network site features to personalize and extend learning experiences, such as connecting students with others who share their academic and career interests, or fostering the sense of social belonging and peer group support that can help students’ educational attainment, persistence, and achievement in schools (Dika & Singh, 2002).

With a new National Educational Technology Plan (U.S. Department of Education [USDOE], 2010) calling for better bridging between students’ in-school and out-of-school learning and teachers’ seamless integration of the technologies students already embrace, this special issue of the Journal of Educational Computing Research is devoted to examining young people’s learning with social media and related issues, where learning is defined as formal or informal learning within or across a range of disciplines. Although there is much speculation about the technology-using practices and preferences of today’s so-called “digital natives,” “cyberkids,” or “net generation,” many popular
accounts fail to portray the diversity of young people’s experiences or substantiate their claims with research-based evidence (Bennett, Maton, & Kervin, 2008). It may be that social media, when used by young people in certain contexts, enable new forms of inquiry, communication, collaboration, identity work, knowledge development, or have positive (or negative) cognitive, social, and emotional impacts (Greenhow, 2011; Greenhow & Robelia, 2009a, 2009b). Despite a media storm linking students’ use of the popular social network site, Facebook, to lower grades (Karpinski, 2009)—claims that have since been disproven (Pasek, More, Hargittai, 2009)—there is actually little published empirical work in the educational literature regarding the intellectual and social practices young people demonstrate—either in naturally occurring, youth-initiated social media spaces such as Facebook—or in niche social network sites, social gaming, or mobile networking applications designed for educational purposes. There are also few studies that examine the influence of social media features and their attendant social practices on students. Although increasing, educational research devoted to understanding young people’s purposes for using particular social media, the features they find most engaging, the socio-technical practices they employ, and ways to define and assess learning and communication using social media, or the lack thereof, are sorely needed. Without such efforts, educators, researchers, and designers will remain unclear about whether social media applications can support or inhibit learning, how and under what conditions.

This special issue of the Journal of Educational Computing Research provides a forum for educators and researchers to present various conceptual and empirical studies related to young people’s use of social media. The first article in this issue examines the prevalence of social media use among U.S. teens and variations among different sub-groups of teenagers, providing a counter-weight to the “digital natives” rhetoric which tends to homogenize teens’ experiences. In “Digital Divides and Social Network Sites: Which Students Participate in Social Media?” June Ahn utilizes a nationally representative survey from the Pew Internet & American Life Project to investigate whether Internet access and participation divides persist with respect to American teenagers’ uses of social network sites. Using binary logistic regression to examine the relationship between social, demographic, and technology variables involved in young people’s participation in social network sites, his results suggest that traditional divide indicators such as Internet access or parent education are not significant predictors of social network site use. U.S. teenagers across various sub-groups appear to find a way to get connected despite factors traditionally perceived as barriers. He argues that deeper understanding of the social and cultural factors related to participation in social technologies is needed for youth populations.

Moving from this macro-level perspective, Richard Beach and Candace Doerr-Stevens, in their article “Using Social Networking for Online Role-Plays to Develop Students’ Argumentative Strategies,” drill down to examine the online social networking practices of a particular group of high school students’ in
a formal learning context. They argue that online social networking can include issue-oriented, argumentative writing and perspective-taking, competencies valued in the Language Arts curriculum. They examined the roles and discourses adopted by high school students participating in an online role-play regarding their school’s Internet policies on open access to websites. The role-play was conducted on a Ning social networking platform. They found that tensions between competing discourses resulted in students’ challenging each other’s perspectives and reflecting on their own perspectives on the issue. Recognition of these competing discourses enhanced students’ awareness of alternative arguments and their ability to convince the school administrators to unblock previously-blocked sites. The authors conclude with recommendations for how social networking sites associated with fostering civic engagement could be designed to better facilitate collaborative argument and adoption of competing perspectives on an issue.

As photo-sharing and video-sharing in social media sites like YouTube and Flickr proliferate and become integrated with reading and writing in popular social network sites like Facebook, many scholars argue that current notions of literacy require re-conceptualization and investigation:

New technologies such as blogs, wikis, massively multiplayer online games, social networking technologies and video- and music-dissemination technologies have rapidly spread, by means of the Internet, each with additional, new literacy forms and functions that are reshaped by social practices...literacy has now come to mean a rapid and continuous process of change in ways in which we read, write, view, listen, compose, and communicate information. (Coiro, Knobel, Lankshear, & Leu, 2008, p. 5)

Providing a step in this direction, Lin Lin, Jennifer Lee, and Eric Robertson, in “Reading while watching video: The effect of video content on reading comprehension and media multitasking ability,” examine the extent to which different media environments, and the emotional content of videos in particular, may affect young people’s reading comprehension and multitasking abilities given certain reading tasks. Changes in media, from page to screen, make “it easy to use a multiplicity of modes... in particular the mode of image—still or moving—as well as other modes, such as music and sound” to convey one’s message (Kress, 2003, p. 6). Literacy scholars and educational technologists are trying to understand whether and how unique assemblages of text and video can impact the readers’ experience and comprehension in online environments, a topic that seems especially relevant to those studying learning and literacy in social media-enabled contexts which are usually *multimodal* (Kress, 2003, p. 35) and interactive. Although Lin et al. conduct their study in an offline television-viewing environment, with 41% of young people’s daily television viewing occurring online (Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010), their results are relevant to those seeking to conceptualize, study, and design for reading comprehension and media...
multitasking in online multimodal context such as online social network and video-sharing sites. Grounding their study in cognitive load theory, Lin, Lee, and Robertson gave reading comprehension tests to 130 university students (primarily ages 18-22) in one of two multitasking environments that were designed to resemble those college undergraduates typically encounter. Two different television videos were used in each environment: one, an emotionally positive, situational comedy; and the other, an emotionally negative in-depth news report. Results indicate that the two videos affected reading comprehension differently, with the news report interfering more severely than the comedy in the test condition. However, when comparing scores on video comprehension, students in the test condition involving the news video scored higher. The researchers offer their interpretations and conclude with insights concerning instructional designs for learning that take the emotional content of media into account. Their study also reminds us that these differences between comprehending “the world shown” and “the world told,” or narrated in text (Kress, 2003), may require new skills and sensibilities and new roles for us as educators.

Next we move from examinations of media use in formal educational contexts to the presence of the Internet and social media in everyday practices, and most importantly, adolescents’ perceptions of their experiences. In their article “Singaporean Adolescents’ Perceptions of Online Social Communication: An Exploratory Factor Analysis,” Robert Zhen and Angeline Cheok Eng Koo help to inform our understanding of social communication venues among a particular cultural sub-group of young people: Singaporean adolescents (ages 11-22). Their study is based on a question many educators are asking: why have adolescents, and different groups of adolescents, found social network sites, blogs, and the like, more appealing for social communication than physical, face-to-face contacts. The study identified the cognitive, psychological, and social factors perceived by adolescents as critical to their online social communication, including self-identity, self-confidence, and self-social factors and examined their interrelationships. It also sought to determine whether demographic data and online experience would significantly predict adolescents’ perceptions of the factors influencing their online social communication. Results showed significant differences between the factors derived from the current study and those suggested in the literature. Regression analyses showed demographic and online experience variables significantly predicted adolescent perceptions in online social communication at various levels. The authors offer insights for researchers, online educators and creators of formal or informal learning environments who seek to understand and build on these adolescent-identified constructs in their future research, teaching or instructional designs.

Another sub-group of young people that are relatively under-explored in the educational computing literature, but increasingly important to understand if we are to design more personalized, equitable, and extended technology-enabled contexts for learning (USDOE, 2010), is the group of adolescents in the United
States from low-income families. Their use of and perceptions of social media like social network sites, and the potential impact of using these technologies on their learning processes and outcomes, is of particular importance. In their article “Help from my ‘Friends:’ Social capital in the social network sites of low-income students,” Christine Greenhow and Lisa Burton explore adolescents’ perceptions and experiences in using MySpace (www.myspace.com): the social network site most commonly used among this group of adolescents. Specifically, they analyzed the relationship between low-income students’ (n = 607) use of this social network site and their reported social capital, a multidimensional construct that has been positively linked to educational persistence, attainment and achievement. They conducted a regression analysis on survey responses to examine the relationship between intensity of online social networking, social capital, and other measures of psychological well-being. Results suggest positive associations between the use of online social networking sites and two forms of social capital. Qualitative data were also utilized to illuminate low income students’ opportunities or barriers for forging and sustaining relationships through online social networking sites, and implications for future research and educational outcomes are discussed.

The five articles discussed above provide insights into young people’s use of social media, including: perspectives from the United States and abroad; from a macro- and micro-level viewpoint; among high school and college-age youth; with attention to young people’s actual curriculum-related social media practices and media-using practices in informal, youth-initiated spaces, or simulated media multi-tasking environments. The articles have linked these practices to cognitive, psychological, and social factors of adolescent development that educational researchers, educators, parents, and administrators presumably care about, such as learners’ development of self-identity, self-confidence, reading, writing, civic engagement, and social capital.

However, the relationship between young people’s engagement with potential learning technologies, such as social media, and formalized assessment of the learning that occurs as a result of such engagement is problematic for several reasons. Toward advancing a solution, Dan Hickey, Jenna McWilliams, and Michelle Honeyford, in their article “Reading Moby-Dick in a Participatory Culture: Organizing Assessment for Engagement in a New Media Era,” identify discrepancies between traditional instructional practices that emphasize individual mastery of abstract concepts and skills, and new media literacy practices that rely upon collaborative, social, and context-specific activity. They argue that conventional assessment practices become problematic for teachers who are interested in integrating “participatory practices” into their classrooms. Through a description of a year-long collaboration around a secondary language arts curriculum, Hickey et al. present their “participatory assessment” framework which was designed to support a social model of learning and to help prepare learners for engagement with and participation in a range of knowledge-building
activities and communities, while supporting gains in more traditional curricular
and standards-based assessments. Their article describes the curriculum, the
approach, and the assessment design principles emerging from this effort.
We applaud the ground-breaking work in this emerging field of social media
and learning represented by the authors of the articles in this special issue.
We would also like to thank Drs. Robert Seidman and Karen Swan for their
help with the creation and editing of this issue.

REFERENCES

issue11_9/barnes
Bennett, S., Maton, K., & Kervin, L. (2008). The digital natives debate: A critical review
boyd, d. m., & Ellison, N. B. (2007). Social network sites: Definition, history, and
and new literacies research. In J. Coiro, M. Knobel, C. Lankshear, & D. Leu (Eds.),
Handbook of research on new literacies (pp. 1-21). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum
Associates.
Cormode, G., & Krishnamurthy, B. (2008). Key differences between Web 1.0 and Web 2.0.
cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/2125/1972
for Education Statistics.
Dika, S. L., & Singh, K. (2002). Applications of social capital in educational literature:
sites as social learning resources. Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 14,
1130-1161.
social networks. Learning, Media and Technology, 34(2), 119-140.
Greenhow, C., Robelia, E., & Hughes, J. (2009a). Web 2.0 and educational research:
Researcher/3804/246-259_05EDR09.pdf
Greenhow, C., Robelia, E., & Hughes, J. (2009b). Research on learning and teaching
Journals/Educational_Researcher/3804/280-283_05EDR09.pdf
Karpinski, A. (2009). A response to reconciling a media sensation with data. First Monday,
index.php/fm/issue/view/289


Dr. Christine Greenhow
Assistant Professor
College of Education
Michigan State University