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The Real Importance of Facebook

It's not the "friending" or the "social networks" or even the sharing. What Facebook truly represents is the first wave of humans' move to a truly interconnected planet, with people as always-on, participative nodes.

By Marc Prensky

Many adults look at young people compulsively checking their Facebook accounts, and worry. They cannot understand why being online is so important to them. "What are they doing," adults ask, "that's more crucial than interacting with the people around them?"

When adults read what their kids are posting, they often see trivialities — the latest silly photographs of friends, pets, and parties, what the kids ate, status updates — almost all things "of the moment." So what makes the kids spend so much time on this online stuff, when there are so many more important things (adults think) for young people to be doing? Isn't all this "checking-in" preventing kids from connecting in important ways with people, in the real ways we have always known were important?

That is, of course, one way to look at it. Many see our kids slipping into what author Nicholas Carr calls "The Shallows." And they worry that the slide may be irreversible.

But there is also a more positive way to look at Facebook (and its brother and sister programs.) It is to see **Facebook, with its billion+ members (1/5 of the world's people), as humanity's first big experiment in being, and acting as, a worldwide, connected community.**

We now live in a world with increasing means of connecting with both information and people — there is an online option for more and more of what we do. The issue is not whether offline is "better" than online (or vice versa) — both have their strengths and weaknesses in each situation. The issue — and what we don't yet know — is how to find and use *the combination of face-to-face and network* in the best way for each of us, in each situation.

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Because the Internet has barely arrived, we do not yet know the best ways (or even many of the good ways) to behave in a networked world — a world not just of connection to information, but of always-on real-time connection to people. Many of us already have a very different relationship to information — how we get our news, buy things, plan trips, etc. — than we did in the past. We should expect most human interactions to change equally radically, and we will only learn how to make these as effective as possible through experimentation and iteration. People, both young and old, are starting to figure this out — mostly by trial and error. Facebook, itself, is experimenting — as users access the network increasingly through their phones, for example, it is continually redesigning its offerings.

It is crucial we view the "best ways to interact with people" as something evolving, rather than as "fundamental human behavior" set in stone. When telephone answering machines first appeared, it was considered rude to have a device, rather than you, answer your phone. Yet only a few years later it was considered extremely rude NOT to have an answering machine. Today we struggle with whether one needs to look up from one's screen when someone asks a question, or whether talking at the dinner table about something trivial, like the weather, is more important than connecting with your friends online.

There are no "right" answers. But, importantly, the beliefs and preferences of those from the Pre-Internet world are not necessarily good guidelines for our kids. People need to feel they are communicating effectively — which is highly situational. One might, before an interview at a bank check (and edit) one's Facebook page, but at a startup, one might just access one's page (and even post to it) during the interview.

A helpful perspective in these times is to view every encounter we come across as "data" in the "grand experiment" that humanity is currently going through of learning to live well and wisely in a new, networked world. If we see kids trading off listening to the teacher in class against checking Facebook, or simultaneously checking their email and holding conversations, it is useful to view these events as "data points" and to ask ourselves "Why?" rather than to be judgmental. In any new world it is dangerous to automatically rely on one's beliefs from the old one (in this case Pre-Internet world) — no matter how strongly one holds those beliefs.

We must not assume that because our kids don't concentrate, or do other things in the same ways we did, that they cannot perform as well – or even better, in the future. Many of us were taught that the ability to focus on one thing for a long time was crucial, but that may be as unnecessary for accomplishing tomorrow's goals as memorizing epic poems and tables. The need to "look someone in the eye," may not be as useful in a networked world as it was in the old. To be accurate and fair, it must be data, and not our attitudes (especially our old attitudes) that determines this.

Facebook —and the network — will evolve quickly, as will "effective behavior" in our world's new networked environment. Viewing ourselves as social scientists and experimenters, rather than as "experienced" people with absolute knowledge of how to behave, will, in this new context, be much more productive. Some of the behaviors we observe may alarm us — but many will surprise us positively as well.

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