



PRODUCT PROFILE

Social Networking Gets Schooled

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To today's students, online social networking is almost second nature outside of the classroom. What about inside the classroom? Educational software and services are taking a cue from Facebook and MySpace, adding a twist of online collaboration and interaction that brings students, teachers and parents together.

As a whole, the education industry is usually relatively slow to integrate technology into the classroom. In lots of schools nationwide, unbridled access to computers and the Internet is still the exception rather than the rule. Sure, school districts use [computer](#) networks, e-mail and teacher pages on school Web sites to more efficiently communicate with staff, students and other teachers. However, using technology to enhance learning is often a by-product rather than the thrust of technology in the classroom.

The moment students get outside of the classroom, on the other hand, social networking is almost a daily ritual.

Dedicated commercial Web 2.0 products and social networking applications are still too new and too rich for typical school leaders to afford. So third-party providers are more likely to offer technology services to students and their schools to expand their horizons in ways never before possible. For example, some school districts are going beyond e-mail technology and using collaboration software and online services to share information, host Web conferences and assign tasks and projects.

"Social networking in the education universe is an idea whose time has come," Edward Fields, CEO of HotChalk, told TechNewsWorld. "Teachers are famous for relying on other teachers for the best ideas about what's working and what's not working. For that reason, as new teachers (read younger, tech-savvy, "Generation Network" college grads) enter the system, they are leveraging education-focused social networks to connect with

other teachers, find content contributed by teachers and make sure that they are wringing every ounce of 'network effect' technology from the Internet."

TechNewsWorld compiled a list of some of the newest and most popular social networking technology tools for education. We looked for established services that provide at least some free services. The following roundup appears in alphabetical order.

Chalk It Up to Blackboard

[Blackboard](#) has long provided online learning tools for schools. Its newest offering is Sync, a collaborative tool that meshes with [Facebook](#). The combination helps students receive information on new assignments, grades and course material when they sign on to their Facebook account. In addition, Sync allows students to connect with other students in their classes to collaborate and study together.

Students can find and connect with their classmates on Facebook, giving them the ability to turn routine social interactions into social learning opportunities. With millions of students using both their Blackboard system and the Facebook Web site every day, Blackboard Sync enables students to learn more about their classmates through their profiles and to leverage their Facebook accounts to create and join online and offline networks and groups to collaborate and study together.

Blackboard Sync is available to all Facebook users that attend any of the thousands of high schools, colleges and universities that use Blackboard worldwide. Student receive information from only the courses in which they are registered, and that information cannot be shared. Institutions that prefer to limit access to Blackboard Sync can block the application entirely.

Time to Cram

For the college learning environment, students in math, physics, chemistry and engineering classes can participate in an online study group that delivers some of the same benefits of a face-to-face group. [Cramster.com](#) fosters social learning through the Cramster Answer Board, where members ask and answer questions.

It also provides access to various types of study materials such as textbook solutions, topic notes, sample problems and practice exams created by the Cramster.com staff, indexed from the Web or contributed by members.

Users have limited access to services and so-called Subject Matter Experts for free. Premium users have unlimited around the clock access to content for US\$9.95/month to \$39.95/year.

Let's Be ePals

[ePals](#) is a fast-growing global network for learning. The ePals Global Learning Community is a network of interconnected classrooms around the world. It provides a safe environment for students and teachers for building and exchanging knowledge, using protected e-mail, blogs, translation tools, evidence-based curricula and authentic, collaborative learning experiences.

ePals offers a range of services and features that are free for students in grades K through 12. One service is ePals SchoolMail. This is a multilingual electronic communications solution that offers schools and districts a protected, customized and collaborative environment. Another service is ePals SchoolBlog, an educational tool for creating unified Web-based platforms that administrators, teachers, parents and students use to achieve academic goals.

The Classroom Match platform lets school officials select learning exchanges with other ePals classrooms according to students' needs and academic targets. The platform lets teachers navigate and track projects. Another feature is In2Books, ePals' curriculum for fostering reading, writing and critical thinking skills. In2Books matches adult pen pals with students who read the same curriculum-based books and exchange online letters about important issues in the books they both read.

Other features include file sharing and storage, personalized homepages, language translation tools and Ask an ePals Teacher. Forums are available for teachers, families and students. Teachers can access lesson plans, instructional guides and collaborative projects.

Sipping on HotChalk

[HotChalk](#) is a mostly free Web 2.0 community for K through 12 teachers, students and parents that promotes the sharing of resources and information. Included in HotChalk's offerings are a learning management system, a library of teacher-contributed lesson plans, professional development courses from McGraw-Hill and premium digital [video content](#) from NBC News.

HotChalk is a collaborative tool for teachers, parents and students. Teachers can access a free learning management system and curriculum tools. Also available is the ability to interact with students and parents regarding assignments and grades.

Free resources include a learning management system, lesson plans, curriculum tools and forums to discuss topics with other teachers. Once a school pays for premium content, teachers at the school have access to all of it. The HotChalk Network contains over 50 partner sites with free educational content geared toward educators. For example, one of the sites, [LessonPlansPage.com](#) has more than 3,500 lesson plans.

Joining Jooners

[Jooners](#) is a free Web site focused on [communication](#) and collaboration between schools and parents. Its e-mail and scheduling Web site allows parents to have immediate online access to school-wide information, such as calendars, events, after-school programs and field trip information. Parents and teachers can arrange sign-up lists for any event that needs parental support, such as book fairs or PTA fundraisers, and coordinate classroom volunteers.

Other features allow users to create opt-in groups for networking from existing a wide variety of contact databases, receive auto-e-mail reminders of events and volunteer duties and create a private or shared calendar for everyone to see upcoming events.

New tools coming soon will include a parent-teacher conference organizer, classroom party organizer, team roster and event invitations.

Nimble Wimba

[Wimba](#) provides collaboration solutions to schools and higher education. Wimba Pronto is an instant messaging platform customized for academia.

Students and their teachers are automatically populated into contact or buddy lists upon course registration. Students can see who is online and chat without having to manually add IM (instant messaging) contacts. Application sharing lets students work on assignments together in real-time with a special application sharing tool. Another feature enables students to communicate via video, audio or text chat.

An added benefit is the ability to connect students and faculty to share ideas and connect outside the classroom. With 84 percent of undergraduate students using instant messaging on a daily basis, Wimba Pronto enables schools and colleges to bridge the gap between how students live and learn, by replicating informal learning settings in the online environment.

Wimba Pronto's academic-centric features enable schools to bring services online in real-time, including the IT department, registrar, financial aid office and library. Another feature, Queued Chat for Tutoring and Office Hours, lets teachers control the IM environment to create a focused setting in which students "line up" for individualized help.

Also, Application Sharing permits students to share any application on their desktop in real-time with their classmates and teachers. With Blended Audio and Video Conferencing, students and teachers can interact in a group setting using their preferred media or Wimba's follow-the-speaker video.