

Review Essay / Comptes rendus

Martínez Alemán, Ana & Wartman, Katherine (2009). *Online Social Networking on Campus: Understanding What Matters in Student Culture*. New York: Routledge. Pages: 149. Price: \$44.95 USD (paper).

Reviewed by Christa Ovenell, Educational Consultant, Vancouver.

The authors of *Online Social Networking on Campus: Understanding What Matters in Student Culture* demonstrate an academic bravery in the simple act of publishing their slim volume. Anything with “online” in its title is destined to be quickly dated, yet Aleman and Wartman doubly curse their publishing endeavour with what could easily be seen as a hubristic subtitle. A few pages of reading reveals that the writers are, in fact, clearly aware of the rapidly changing technological environment being documented—and its impact on student experience—and further, show no indication of an ego-driven desire to write a classic, definitive work on the matter (as if there ever could be one). What the authors set out to do, and admirably achieve, is to illustrate the importance of understanding the impact of social networking on the student experience in college, from a student perspective. Their anthropologically informed research is critically important simply because it has been all too overlooked in the past: while there are myriad bodies of work exploring the impact of computer-mediated communication for learning and teaching in a campus setting, there is little work that prioritizes the student experience within these mediated communication channels.

The authors’ research is timely, as now, more than ever, digitally non-native administrators and faculty are beginning to wrestle with, or at least acknowledge, the existence and importance of Web 2.0 technologies. The book’s scope is not so much limited as it is clearly defined: it is not mired in an exhaustive exploration of new technologies, but firmly commits itself to an examination of Facebook, a wildly successful social networking tool originally designed for (and in fact originally limited to) American college students. Surely the large American publishing market, the fact that the authors are firmly ensconced in American higher education institutions, and Facebook’s roots in the American college system contribute to the lack of North American inclusivity in the language and range of study, but this book is still of value to a Canadian—in fact, perhaps a global—audience. Different online social networks may be more appropriate in European, African, or Asian settings, but the inclusion of student voices is what makes this book unique and valuable.

There is a curious spatial subtext to this work, apparent even in the title: online, yes, but “On Campus” as well. That intentional geographic placement resonates throughout the work, as the authors grapple with the implications of online social

networking—itself a placeless phenomenon—in residential campus settings. The book is divided into five chapters, a preface, glossary, references, author notes, and index. Excluding the author notes and references, of course, each section returns at some point, perhaps unconsciously, to the geographic theme. The preface “places” the book within the online social world of youth and asserts the position of the researcher within that world. Chapter 1, the introduction likens Facebook to other newly emerging technologies, citing the impact on student judicial affairs in particular. It clearly and relevantly outlines the myriad ways both students and university administrators use social networking sites, and find their space within them.

Chapter 2, “Emergence And Acceleration,” is an impressively documented section describing “current” student use of computer-mediated communication (CMC) and CMC’s impact on the students within “real world” campus environments. The first two chapters will almost certainly be voted most likely to age poorly: the careful research was unfortunately out of date upon publication, and possibly by the time the book was ready to print. As a background, however, on the stunning impact CMC has had in college environments, it stands as a solid piece of research backed by a flawless literature review. Any student affairs officer or administrator with limited first-hand experience with Facebook—or indeed, the premise of social networking—would be well served by reading these chapters.

Chapter 3, “Students Speak,” is what truly differentiates this book from other academic works on the topic of social networking. The authors have identified and addressed a lacuna in the literature. As the previous chapters indicate, there is a significant body of work addressing the impact of CMC, and even some that attempts to unravel the importance of newly emerging technologies, but nothing which foregrounds the students’ own experience, in their own words. Neither the authors nor I am aware of another work that provides an in-depth exploration of how students make meaning of their online experiences, of how they manage and mitigate the impact of their online reality with their on-campus life. Once again, the geographic theme weaves through the students’ descriptions of their social-media use as they ponder the apparently universal themes of use-consciousness, campus culture, identity, and impression management. Throughout this chapter, the authors remind us of their rigorous research methods and illuminate the fact that their featured students are not composites, but rather present authentic student voices chosen for their representative perspectives. I initially questioned the validity of the representation, as the students are not easily identifiable as “traditional students.” While they are all of traditional age and live in residence, all are student leaders, two are gay, and only one is White. This sample is neither representative of the Facebook (or virtual) demographic nor of the North American campus environment, and yet it is somehow—for me at least—more authentic because of this. As a former campus administrator, I was interested in hearing voices I did not always have the chance to hear. I am not sure if selection of interview participants was active, passive, or politically correct, because it is not specifically referenced in the work, but I applaud the authors on their choices in this chapter.

Once the students are heard, the authors take the opportunity to root the student voices in the theories of student affairs practice. Chapter 4, “The New Campus Reality,” mirrors the introduction and makes practical suggestions for how to manage the impact of the ubiquity of the online social networks on campus, while Chapter 5, “The

Future of the Social Graph,” makes readers most aware of the immediacy of that impact in both the virtual and real environments students now call home.

The authors must be complimented for their careful approach to this slippery subject. They have managed to use students’ own voices to define and deliver important lessons about the post-modern nature of student identity, culture, and the simulacra of virtual geography. They do not patronize, nor do they overwhelm; there is a certain simplicity in their approach to research and recounting. While perhaps even aggressively (and possibly unnecessarily) academic in tone, the important words of the students are given voice and, for an instant, honoured. This is a useful and important work documenting, as its title suggests, what matters in student culture; it will be of value to anyone wanting to better understand the ins and outs of social networking and its impact on both the real and virtual campus and those who “live” there. ♣