WHAT ARE TEENS REALLY LEARNING FROM BLOGS?:
BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN SEX EDUCATION AND THE INTERNET

THESIS

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ABSTRACT

This article attempts to synthesize a wide spectrum of literature to investigate how some teens may be using blogging as a means of sexual exploration. This review begins with an investigation of the politicization of knowledge surrounding the development of sexuality education programs in the United States, with particular emphasis on the rise of the abstinence-only movement. This is followed by an analysis of the effects of media and advances in technology on sexuality, primarily in the case of adolescents. The article then turns to examining how contemporary adolescents actually learn about sex. Literature is presented arguing that schools are not adequately engaging with technology to connect with students' daily lives, that adolescents use their online abilities outside of adult supervision to find sexual content on the internet, and that adolescents are increasingly utilizing the Internet's unique capabilities as an interactive medium to explore sexuality. This interaction is then fully examined through an analysis of the recent trend of blogging—what it means and how some young people may be using it as a powerful learning tool, whether or not they realize they are doing so. Finally, several suggestions will be provided for the directions future research should take to empirically investigate the practice of teen blogging as an innovative means of learning about sexuality.
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INTRODUCTION

Adolescent\textsuperscript{1} sexuality is almost universally recognized—by researchers, by politicians, by the media, and by parents—as a critical issue in American society, yet, like so many important issues, it also remains deeply divisive. Adolescents are at particular risk for almost all negative consequences associated with sexual activity, including unwanted pregnancy and abortion and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) (Satcher, 2001; American Academy of Pediatrics, 2001; Starkman & Rajani, 2002; Weaver, Smith, & Kippax, 2005), yet American society has reached little consensus on how to properly provide them with the necessary tools to prevent these and other negative outcomes. As self-appointed arbiters of morality have recently altered the sex education landscape through efforts to politicize access to knowledge about sex, the effects of a technologically expanding mediascape have only served to intensify and complicate the sexual messages teens receive. This thesis will examine evidence that suggests a significant divide is growing between how today's young people are taught about sex in schools and how they actually learn about it. The Internet may present a medium for many teens to navigate the complicated and dangerous terrain posed by the sexual awakening that comes with puberty in uniquely democratic and interactive ways that were previously impossible. A review of foundational and current literature will argue that some teens may be employing a

\textsuperscript{1} Throughout this thesis, the terms “adolescents,” “teens,” and “young people” are used interchangeably to refer to persons aged 13-18, unless otherwise noted.
particular online tool called “blogging” to interactively explore with their peers the 
boundaries and permutations of sexuality, outside the direction or even understanding of 
many adults.

This analysis will attempt to synthesize a wide spectrum of literature to probe 
available knowledge that may be relevant to an investigation of teens’ sexual exploration 
through blogging. Though at present little research has deeply investigated this specific 
subject, the work of many noteworthy researchers and theorists provides information 
which may help to examine the issue from a variety of angles. This review will thus begin 
with an investigation of the politicization of knowledge surrounding the development of 
sexuality education programs in the United States, with particular emphasis on the rise of 
the abstinence-only movement. This will be followed by an analysis of the effects of 
media and advances in technology on sexuality, primarily in the case of adolescents. With 
these foundations established, the thesis will turn to examining how contemporary 
adolescents actually learn about sex. Literature will be presented arguing that schools are 
not adequately engaging with technology to connect with students’ daily lives, that 
adolescents use their online abilities outside of adult supervision to find sexual content on 
the internet, and that adolescents are increasingly utilizing the Internet’s unique 
capabilities as an interactive medium to explore sexuality. These interactive features truly 
set the Internet apart from all previous media outlets; therefore, this interaction will be fully 
examined through an analysis of the recent trend of blogging—what it means and how 
some young people may be using it as a powerful learning tool, whether or not they realize
they are doing so. Finally, several suggestions will be provided for the directions future research should take to empirically investigate the practice of teen blogging as an innovative means of learning about sexuality.
SETTING THE STAGE

Politicization of Knowledge

Though controversies over the politicization of knowledge about sex and access to sexual information are nothing new, the practice of sexuality education in schools has undergone several significant shifts since its inception. Sexuality education was developed and introduced in public schools in the late 19th century primarily as a means of controlling young people's rampant and dangerous sexuality and instilling in them morality and propriety (Elia, 2000). Since the midpoint of the twentieth century, however, several social changes have altered the foundations of sexuality education. Most notably, the link between marriage and sexual activity has become more tenuous. In the second half of the twentieth century the gap between age of physical sexual maturity and average age of marriage widened considerably. Recent data indicates that the median age at first sexual intercourse is 17.4 years for women and 17.7 years for men, while median age at first marriage is 25.3 years for women and 27.1 years for men (Santelli et al., 2006). Such trends in delaying marriage, along with social changes that came with sexual revolution of the 1960's and 1970's, have served to make premarital sex more acceptable and to deemphasize marriage's role as the "master event" that govern[s] young people's sexual lives" (Coontz, 2005, p. 247). To some, this also represents an alarming departure from sexual morality, and certain public figures and organizations have stepped up as what Becker (1963) refers to as "moral entrepreneurs" to take advantage of these trends by
advocating stricter sexual norms (Irvine, 2002; Klein, 2006). Their increased pushes for
abstinence until marriage as a sexual standard for young people has left sexuality education
at the nexus of political conflicts reflecting larger social concerns.

According to Weaver et al. (2005), the HIV/AIDS pandemic also created a major
turning point in the evolution of sex education policies in developed countries around the
world. In the 1960’s and 70’s, the authors’ focal countries of the United States, France, the
Netherlands, and Australia practiced similar approaches to sex education grounded in
population control. With the outbreak of HIV/AIDS in the 1980’s, however, the primary
objective of sex education became the prevention of STDs. But whereas policies in the
Netherlands, France, and Australia started encompassing larger conceptions of young
people’s sexual health and well-being with the incorporation of safe-sex practices, the
United States began moving in the opposite direction. Comprehensive approaches to sex
education began declining in the U.S. in favor of programs espousing abstinence from
sexual activity as the only effective way to prevent STDs. Despite the obvious cultural
differences which partially account for this divergence in direction, it is also clear that the
previously mentioned moral entrepreneurs in America have been making progress toward
uniting sexuality, marriage, and morality in popular discourse and policy.

These more fundamental changes were occurring not in the actual pedagogy or
practice of sex education but in the public and political realms as the moral entrepreneurs
increased in strength and began raising open concerns about and lobbying attacks at the
practice of sex education. The Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United
States (SIECUS) was created in 1964 to examine the practice of sexuality education in the
United States, and it has been tracking controversies in the field ever since. A summary of
controversies over the decade of 1993-2003 (SIECUS, 2003) shows increased politicized clashes over curriculum and pedagogy. The main argument by detractors is that sexuality education as a whole is too explicit. Topics including non-copulative sexual behaviors, contraception, and homosexuality form the backbone of many of these arguments, as tempers flare over what adolescents should be exposed to. SIECUS also notes an increase in funding problems and administrative roadblocks for sexuality education programs, an indication that these debates are superseding their local roots to take on district-, state-, or even nationwide significance. By the 2004-2005 school year, SIECUS (2005) reports a continued steady increase in the number of controversies, noting 153 controversies in 38 states in that year alone. The report also explicitly notes an increasing role played by state policy-makers in local sexuality education decisions. Clearly, not only the product but also the process of sexuality education is changing.

The trends noted above point to a monumental movement that has quietly begun to take the place of programs that focus on broad principles of sexual health and safe-sex practices: abstinence-only sex education. Irvine (2002) notes that since the 1970’s conservative Christian groups have shifted their opposition to sex education from arguing whether sex education should be taught (i.e. attacking its practice) to arguing how it should be taught (i.e. offering abstinence-only education as an alternative). Throughout the 1980’s, the movement to replace comprehensive sex education programs gained momentum among a variety of converging sources—including conservative parents, increasingly political right-wing Christian organizations, and federal initiatives—to advocate young people’s total abstinence from sexual contact as the sole means of achieving the goals of reducing STD infection rates and teenage pregnancy rates (seen as
the only appropriate goals for sex education programs). This swift and pervasive
transformation has been documented both by nonprofit organizations (e.g., SIECUS and
the Guttmacher Institute, among others) and by academic researchers (Darroch, Landry, &
Singh, 2000; Irvine, 2002; Santelli et al., 2006; Duberstein Lindberg, Santelli, & Singh,
2006); their findings paint a clear picture. Between 1988 and 1999, for example, the
percent of teachers teaching abstinence as the only way to prevent pregnancy and STDs
rose from 2 percent to 25 percent (Santelli et al., 2006). Likewise, between 1995 and 2002
the percentages of female students aged 15-19 who had received instruction on both birth
control methods and abstinence declined from 84 percent to 65 percent (Duberstein
Lindberg et al., 2006). This means that over one-third of high-school aged women are
being taught that abstinence from sexual activity is the only way to avoid STDs and
unwanted pregnancies. Notably, the federal government was instrumental in effecting this
change, mostly due to the federal initiative known as Title V.

In 1996, congress passed a piece of welfare legislation adjusting the Social Security
Act, attaching in the process new provisions under Title V, section 510, known as the
Separate Program for Abstinence Education. Its initiatives are indicative of the movement
as a whole and serve to codify both its positions and its success; accordingly, its
stipulations will be reproduced here. Abstinence education is defined as an educational or
motivational program which:

a) has as its exclusive purpose, teaching the social, psychological, and health gains to
   be realized by abstaining from sexual activity
b) teaches abstinence from sexual activity outside marriage as the expected standard
   for all school-age children
c) teaches that abstinence from sexual activity is the only certain way to avoid
   out-of-wedlock pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, and other associated
   health problems
d) teaches that a mutually faithful monogamous relationship in the context of marriage is the expected standard for human sexual activity

e) teaches that sexual activity outside of the context of marriage is likely to have harmful psychological and physical effects

f) teaches that bearing children out-of-wedlock is likely to have harmful consequences for the child, the child’s parents, and society

g) teaches young people how to reject sexual advances and how alcohol and drug use increases vulnerability to sexual advances

h) teaches the importance of attaining self-sufficiency before engaging in sexual activity (Social Security Administration, as cited in Santelli et al., 2006, p. 73)

Once these definitions were established, a funding package was put in place to promote the practice of abstinence education. Federal funding for abstinence-only programs increased from $60 million in fiscal year 1998 to $168 million in fiscal year 2005 (Santelli et al., 2006). Moreover, because of a requirement that states match federal funds, state dollars that previously supported comprehensive sex education have been shifted to abstinence-only programs (Starkman & Rajani, 2002). Consequently, abstinence education is now the prominent structure through which American teenagers are formally introduced to sex.

Since abstinence-only sex education has exploded, numerous researchers have critiqued its practice (McKay, 1998; Goldfarb & McCaffree, 2000; Elia, 2000; Selverstone, 2000; Starkman & Rajani 2002; Dailard, 2002; Ingham, 2005; Santelli et al., 2006). Perhaps the strongest and most cited counter-argument is that although the language of Title V requires teaching that sexual activity outside the context of marriage is likely to have harmful psychological effects, no credible scientific data actually suggest that consensual sex between adolescents is harmful. Moreover, though abstinence is promoted as the only guaranteed method of avoiding unwanted consequences of sexual activity, this theoretical definition allows its adherents to ignore the reality of how many
adolescents practice abstinence. A variety of noncoital behaviors (including kissing and manual or oral stimulation) or even one “slip” (an isolated instance of sexual intercourse) can possibly lead to various STDs or, in the case of intercourse, an unwanted pregnancy. Sex education programs that focus exclusively or predominantly on abstinence also make assumptions about their targets and the “sexual directions of their lives” (Elia, 2000, p. 126), disregarding the specific reproductive health needs of adolescents with previous sexual experience or differing sexual expressions. Finally, abstinence-only sexuality education programs perpetuate undemocratic ideals in schools by focusing on a top-down, teacher-centered approach to learning and by regulating access to information and dialogue on a variety of subjects. This directly opposes many of the goals of liberal education, such as promoting critical thinking and independent thought.

Moreover, comparative research at various levels of analysis in fact supports the argument that abstinence-only education is, at best, no better at reducing negative consequences of sexuality than more comprehensive approaches. A study by Sather and Zinn (2002), for example, compares values and attitudes toward premarital sexual activity in two groups of 7th and 8th grade students—one group who received state-funded, abstinence-only education and one who did not. Though the authors do not examine the messages received by their “control” group (students who received the “usual” sex education program at their school without state abstinence funding), they find no significant differences between these control students and the students receiving abstinence-only education in the areas of values and attitudes toward premarital sexual activity or intentions to engage in premarital sexual activity. In addition, Weaver et al.’s (2005) international survey of four developed countries’ sex education policies and
outcomes finds that despite the predominance of abstinence-based sex education in the U.S., young people initiate sexual activity at approximately the same age as those in countries whose sex education program are more comprehensive. Furthermore, in 1998 there were 30.4 births per 1,000 women aged 15-17 in the United States (compared to 2.2 in the Netherlands, 3.4 in France, and 9.5 in Australia), and in 1996 there were 30.2 abortions per 1000 females aged 15-19 in the U.S. (compared to 3.9 in the Netherlands, 13.2 in France, and 23.9 in Australia) (UNICEF, 2001, as cited in Weaver et al. 2005). Finally, a very recent study (Trenholm et al., 2007) commissioned by the U.S. Congress looks extensively at four Title V, section 510, abstinence education programs to assess their effectiveness after three to five years. The findings show that the programs demonstrate: “...no overall impact on teen sexual activity, [and] no differences in rates of unprotected sex...” (p. 58). Moreover, the researchers note that peer support for maintaining abstinence diminishes as adolescents get older. It remains to be seen how the legislature will respond to this report, but evidence is mounting that abstinence-only education is not achieving its goals.

Despite the upsurge in federal support for abstinence education programs and the politicization of the issue by influential groups, the American public as a whole does not necessarily support this method to the exclusion of other information. Public opinion polls repeatedly show that the parents of high-school and middle-school students not only overwhelmingly support teaching sex education in schools but see no contradiction or mixed message in providing information on both abstinence and contraception (Irvine, 2002; Santelli et al., 2006). As with many issues in American politics, those with clout or
the means to raise their voices the loudest have made their opinions a reality for much of the country. The politicization of knowledge has restricted the practice sexuality education in America, and adolescents are left to face the consequences alone.

*Media Effects on Sexuality*

As political changes were altering the practice of sex education in schools, rapid advancements in technology were also exploding in scale, bringing a level of media saturation never before experienced in daily American life. From television to VHS to the Internet, American homes are being penetrated further and further with a profusion of media, while Americans themselves are gaining more and more control over and interactivity with their media. As Brown, Steele, and Walsh-Childers (2002) argue, media consumption now provides, perhaps paradoxically, the major route to the individual expression of identity. The authors note that this is particularly true of teens, for as teenagers develop a sense of self separate from their parents and in relation to their friends, one of the most straightforward means open to them is their choice in a variety of media. During their development, teens will probably “try on” and experiment with a variety of identities, many shaped and advertised through media. Thus, the core identity that evolves as these teens become adults may be significantly shaped by their adolescent media diet.

Psychological theory largely agrees that a significant aspect of an adolescent’s identity formation process rests on sexuality (from Freud in 1905 [as cited in Levy-Warren, 1996] to the more recent *Handbook of Adolescent Psychology* [Miller & Simon, 1980]). It is no coincidence, then, that sexuality in the media has always been a source of deep-rooted controversy. Several theorists have argued that new technologies are usually first
criticized on the grounds that they promote sexual immorality (Slade, 2000; Ross, 2005; Klein, 2006)—for example, Klein (2006) mentions that Congress outlawed sending erotic still photos to Civil War soldiers in 1865—but it is also true that the sex industry can encourage technological advancement. In his book *Pornography in America*, Slade (2000) discusses how makers of pornography are often at the forefront of capitalizing on new media technologies, such as VHS and the Internet. The impact of pornography is both technological and psychological, however. Slade refers to it as a “user’s manual for desire” (p. 8) that has, through various media, shown generations of Americans such things as birth control, positions of intercourse, construction of fantasies, and sexual techniques. Adolescents have always had access to pornography, such as sneaking peeks at a parent’s or friend’s explicit magazines or videos, but the ease and scope of this access has widened exponentially with the capabilities of the Internet. As access continues to expand, the necessity of understanding the consequences of media exposure will only become more imperative.

Although debates over the “threats” posed by media on society have erupted with nearly every new medium from comic books to radio to rock music, television’s capacity to bring moving pictures directly into the home formed the foundation for many of the current debates and research concerning sexuality in modern media (Strasburger 1995). The capability for television to present sexual themes does not lie solely in the realm of pornography or other adult-oriented programming, however. Implicit sexuality pervades programs aimed at both wide audiences and adolescents in particular, and it is on these representations that much research has focused. A study by Cope-Farrar and Kunkel (2002) examined the nature and extent of sexual messages (particularly portrayals of
sexual risk and responsibility) presented in the fifteen prime-time television programs most frequently viewed by teenagers in America (according to Nielsen television ratings), including such shows as *The Simpsons, Friends, Home Improvement*, and *Fresh Prince of Bel Aire*. Perhaps unsurprisingly, most of the programs in the sample contained sexual messages, whether in the form of talking about sex, portrayals of sexual behavior, or both. Much more alarming, however, a large majority of characters who engaged in sexual behaviors did not experience any clear consequences, while of the small number who did, almost all the consequences were positive. Discussion of risk and responsibility was also sparse, occurring in only 11 of 80 scenes in the sample containing talk about sex and only 3 of 99 scenes involving sexual behavior. This reveals an obvious concern, a threat highlighted by another study by Ward, Gorvine, and Cytron (2002) that also analyzes prime-time television programs popular among teenagers. After presenting a large sample of young college undergraduates with several television clips containing sexual themes, the authors found that viewers attached a high level of realism to the scenes they watched and identified strongly with the characters portrayed. Such conditions can lead to viewers' believing portrayals of sexuality on television as realistic, representative, and even admirable.

Several theories have emerged to analyze the effects of media sexuality on adolescents. Brown et al. (2002) review the application of Social Learning Theory in this context, predicting that television viewers will be likely to imitate behaviors they see depicted on the screen by attractive models who are rewarded and/or not punished. Imitation is also more likely if the media consumer finds the depiction realistic. Similarly, Gunter (2002) synthesizes research on the theory that television socializes viewers to
internalize interactions as “scripts.” That is, characters on the screen produce models for
correct behavior in different settings, including sexual situations. These scenes entail more
than just specific behaviors, encompassing entire scenarios and sequences of behavior.
Gunter hypothesizes that the effects of television messages on teenage sexual behavior are
usually indirect in the form of such “scripts” or in promoting certain values, though these
effects may be more powerful when mediating influences from parents or other sources
(such as sexuality education programs) are missing or ineffective. Though no clear links
have been established between media exposure and behavior outcomes, Gunter’s review of
research presents a compelling case that repeated exposure to sexually-oriented media may
shape how individuals think about sexual issues and develop values.

Though television certainly remains important in looking at media effects on
adolescent sexuality, the development of the Internet has changed the landscape
significantly. Ross (2005) identifies one key way in which the Internet can “transfigure”
sexuality for users—by removing the social aspect of sexuality. Though all media creates
distance between object and consumer to some degree, only the Internet allows multiple
users to interact—through chat rooms or discussion boards, for example—without
necessarily seeing one another as complete, multifaceted human beings. The sense of self,
too, can become disassociated online, as boundaries blur between the online and “real”
worlds. Participants can engage in activities online they may not have pursued in “real”
life as there may be a sense that such activities are not physical and thus not “real” in and of
themselves. They also may do things they would not usually do in contexts they perceive
as less anonymous. This view of human interaction online has important implications for
the development of sexuality, especially in adolescents.
Pornography remains an important issue in the online realm as well, perhaps even more so because of the unprecedented ease of access for minors. Fisher and Barak (2001) overview research and theory in social psychology on Internet pornography and proffer a hypothesis that the social nature of individuals can be a predictor of its effects. According to such a theory, antisocial individuals will seek out antisocial sexual stimuli on the Internet and lose awareness of the constraints of reality in dealing with sexual situations, while “normal range” individuals will rely on past learning and experiences of acceptable and unacceptable sexual situations to avoid antisocial sexual stimuli online. This raises concern for adolescents, however, who may not yet have fully developed social selves or past experiences on which to rely when confronted with pornographic content or encounters.

Survey research indicates that adolescents are indeed interacting with Internet sexuality. The Pew Internet and American Life Project (Pew Internet), a non-profit research center and perhaps the best resource for data on the social effects of the Internet on Americans, has published several national survey-based reports about teenagers’ behavior online. A 2001 report (Lenhart et al., 2001) found that 19 percent of boys and 11 percent of girls report that they have lied about their age to gain access to a web site—a verification tool often used for pornographic sites—and this number increased to a full 25 percent for boys aged 15-17. Teens with several years of Internet experience are more likely than newcomers to have lied about their age to gain access to a web site. These numbers are in fact comparable to the reported use of pornographic sites by adults (23 percent of men and 7 percent of women report visiting such web sites). Moreover, teens also report encountering unsolicited sexual material, including pornographic spam email.
(advertisements) or being approached in public chat rooms. Though over half of the teenage respondents answered that the Internet led teens to do dangerous or harmful things “only a little” or “not at all,” these findings seem to point to a more complex conclusion.

According to another recent Pew Internet report (Lenhart, Madden, & Hitlin, 2005), these phenomena are not limited to a few “wired” teens. The report looks at trends in teens’ use of technology, finding that roughly 21 million teens (87 percent of American youth aged 12 to 17) go online. The start of junior high school presents the largest jump in Internet usage for adolescents (60 percent to 82 percent from 6th to 7th grades), and the numbers continue to climb throughout high school before topping out at 94 percent for all 11th and 12th graders. Also, more than half of teens who go online say they do so at least daily. In a world where the vast majority (83 percent) of teens report that “most” of the people they know use the Internet, it becomes nearly impossible to avoid its effects, both positive and negative. Parental involvement and regulation may mitigate harmful effects, and a separate report (Lenhart, 2005) indicates that most parents attempt to do so, whether through content filters on home computers, through house rules about when or for how long their children can go online, or by checking where a child has gone online. Despite such attempts, however, Lenhart notes that the majority of parents and teens agree that most teens do things online they would rather their parents not see.

Despite the wealth of research on teens’ exposure to media sexuality, it remains a difficult task to pin down the exact effects, if any, of such exposure. Researchers who look broadly at pornography in America (Slade, 2000; Gunter, 2002; Loftus, 2002; Klein, 2006) remind readers that no clear links have been established between moderate adult exposure to pornography and harmful psychological or sociological outcomes, though Fisher and
Barak (2001) point out that problems in defining terms (e.g. "moderate," "adult," "harmful," and even "pornography" itself) serve to complicate any analysis of effects. The case remains even less clear for adolescents, as little research has investigated the use of pornography by persons under the age of 18. Media effects on sexuality can range from more than simply providing explicit content on sexual intercourse, however, for through mainstream channels it can advertise models of sexual attractiveness or body image, create standards for dating practices, and provide information on issues such as sexual orientation, STDs, and sexual coercion (Brown et al. 2002). It also seems that sexuality education programs can mitigate some of the harmful effects of sexually explicit media (McCaffree & Matlack, 2001; Levesque, 2003; Greenfield, 2004). It is clear, however, that media sexuality affects how adolescents think about sexual issues, and it is with this understanding that this analysis will continue to investigate what is becoming a part of this thinking.
HOW ADOLESCENTS REALLY LEARN ABOUT SEX

The School and Technology

While adolescents are exposed to more and more media messages and information on sexuality, from sexual “scripts” on television programs to Internet pornography, sexuality education programs are moving rapidly toward more and more restrictive, authoritarian modes of teaching. These two developments force adolescents to navigate by themselves the divide between their schooling and their experiences, a feat not all are able or care to do. By ignoring the reality of young people’s lives, it seems that sexuality education as it is currently practiced effectively accomplishes little in attracting interest, providing advice, or affecting outcomes in its target audience. Abstinence education does acknowledge media effects and attempts to mitigate them through its “just say no” message, but it ultimately fails by not truly engaging with the two main forces underlying modern media: technology and democracy.

In her informative book Learning from Cyber-Savvy Students, Hird (2000) argues that, historically, schools have been very resistant to new technologies, perhaps because of the many challenges involved in acquiring and applying them in classrooms. Television has only fairly recently gained popularity and credibility as a teaching tool, while hurdles for the use of the Internet remain extremely high. For computers, problems arise not only in purchasing machines and wiring school buildings, but also in training teachers to use them and providing technical staff to keep them working. Hird reveals what may be the
most significant hurdle to truly applying Internet technology in the classroom, however: “The potential for computer technology to transform learning challenges the traditional relationship among the teacher, the student, and knowledge” (p. 31). While watching an educational video in class does not upset the role of the teacher as the sole guardian of knowledge, truly engaging with the Internet and its interactive capabilities changes how students experience the process of learning. Teachers may be unwilling to relinquish the role—the “sage on the stage”—they witnessed their own teachers and professors play in both primary school and in teacher-training programs. But the Internet is rapidly changing contexts. As a truly revolutionary technology, it has the potential to transform how we think about both teaching and learning.

In order to gain a veneer of technology-savvy, many schools have attempted to utilize controlled approaches to the Internet. Almost all teens (94 percent) report using the Internet as a research tool for school projects, and a majority (71 percent) used mostly Internet-based sources for the last big report they wrote for school (Lenhart et al, 2001). As Hird (2000) argues, however, many schools place a disproportionate emphasis on the information-gathering functions of the Internet, envisioning it as a sort of searchable, graphical encyclopedia. This aligns most closely with a model of knowledge transmission from teacher to students. One problem with this approach is that it encourages students to disregard the learning opportunities present in other media, including pictures, video, or non-technical writing, which can falsely lead students to assume that they are not learning when consuming such media. Although many empirical studies (e.g. Bauseman, Cassady, Smith, & Stroud, 2005; Shell, et al., 2005; Bilgin & Geban, 2006; Liu, 2006; Nguyen, Hsieh, & & Allen, 2006; Twyman & Tindal, 2006; Van Eck, 2006; Taylor, Casto, & Walls, 19
2007) suggest that the inclusion of technology in classrooms can enhance student learning and attitudes toward learning, researchers agree that a variety of factors—including student familiarity with technology, teacher engagement with technology, interactivity of the technology, and the desired learning outcomes—make it difficult to pin down exactly what constitutes an effective use of technology and how to best measure its effects.

Part of the difficulty lies in the fact that, for the most part, students come into the classroom with a wide range of experiences and familiarity with technologies, most of this gained outside of the school environment. In fact, only 5 percent of online teens report that they learned how to use the Internet in class, while 40 percent of online teens report that they taught themselves how to use email and the Internet and are in fact often the teachers explaining the Internet to their parents and families (Lenhart et al., 2001). Technology thus often fosters what can appear to be, under a top-down model, a backward process of knowledge transmission, and adults seem left out of the technological loop. In a Pew Internet study (Levin & Arafeh, 2002) consisting of focus groups of middle school and high school students, participants acknowledged that though they do utilize the Internet to complete schoolwork or manage day-to-day educational activities, the majority of their Internet usage occurs, “outside of the school day, outside of the school building, outside of the direction of their teachers” (p. 14). Students make it clear that it is administrators rather than individual teachers who set the overall tone for Internet use with schools, and that teachers in particular subjects, such as English, are more likely to take advantage of the Internet. But overall, administrative support remains tentative at best, and schools leave this important arena for both teaching and learning outside the classroom.
Because schools seem reluctant to unleash the full capabilities of the Internet on students, they do not truly engage with it and its learning potential. Perhaps unsurprisingly, students are well aware of this. Participants in the above Pew Internet study (Levin & Arafeh, 2002) could name both good and bad projects teachers assigned using the Internet, but they said that assignments that were not engaging were most common. Said one high school girl, “...sometimes teachers just want you to use the Internet because it’s the Internet—let’s integrate it into schools... Sometimes teachers just don’t know...when it’s easier to read a book and when it’s easier to use the Internet” (p. 16). Students want interactivity on the Internet, but not necessarily at the expense of interactivity in the classroom. A high school boy, for example, said “Doing labs online—that’s stupid. I think practical is much better. Interactive dissecting. It’s stupid” (p. 17). Good Internet projects, according to the students, are activities that may involve finding rare information to duplicate a foreign sculpture, doing a web-based scavenger hunt on the Olympics, or creating a business web page according to their interests. These same students also repeatedly asserted that they wanted more and more engaging Internet assignments involving activities related to their lives and that doing such assignments would significantly improve their attitude toward school and learning. Teachers are simply not providing them with rich opportunities.

Schools might improve students’ attitudes toward learning if they fostered a related virtue of the Internet: its democratic nature. The technology underpinning the Internet is revolutionary first and foremost because it is accessible and usable by anyone with Internet access. Users can determine where in an extensive web of pages they wish to browse, following topics of interest to them in any form, and users can participate in a variety of
interactive features, including chat rooms, bulletin boards, and web site creation. The school environment, on the other hand, is not nearly as free. As Hird (2000) argues, educational spaces are controlled through time allotments, school rules, and tests (standardized or otherwise), which control the ways in which students both learn and express their knowledge. Furthermore, this control only becomes stricter as students become older and progress through grades. But on the Internet, she explains, these structures are completely redefined. Perhaps most importantly, distinctions between work and free time melt away, and it is possible to acknowledge all of the ways in which learning can and does take place. Formal learning in the classroom is undermined by school bells and other structural elements that signal separations or finality in learning. As long as schools remain largely authoritarian environments, it is likely they will face larger resistance and apathy from generations of students who realize that different modes of learning exist.

Consequently, Elia (2000) argues that to be truly effective, comprehensive sexuality programs must also become democratic. This must occur not only as a function of the classroom experience but as a direct challenge to the authoritarian, undemocratic nature of American schooling in general. Perhaps more than any other discipline, effective democratic sexuality education requires egalitarian, trusting relationships between students and teachers and a true engagement with the reality of students’ lives. When practiced democratically and comprehensively, sexuality education has the potential to foster continuing benefits affecting many aspects of students’ behavior, ethics, and commitment to life-long learning. A study by McCaffree and Matlack (2001) found that former students of a comprehensive sexuality education class from the senior year of high
school believed that the course had a variety of long-term positive impacts on their lives, including enhanced self-exploration, sexual health and relationship skills, and increased comfort dealing with issues of sexuality. The authors argue that measuring outcomes of sexuality education with statistics on such things as teenage pregnancies and STD rates ignores the importance of such immeasurable but important rewards that democratic education can provide.

Measuring the outcomes of sexuality education programs by such negative rates serves to distance its practice from students’ actual needs. Though adolescents certainly must be provided with tools to protect themselves from the dangers involved in sexual activity, they are also exploring a variety of concerns about the developmental, emotional, romantic, and pleasurable sides of sexuality (Miller & Simon, 1980; Levy-Warrren, 1996). Accordingly, Ingham (2005) articulates one of the most radical critiques of the evaluation of sex education. He argues that the intense popular focus on public health outcomes can serve to make invisible these other aspects of sexuality, including both personal and shared pleasure through sexual contact. Including positive sexual developments and experiences in school curricula, he argues, may actually lead to positive public health outcomes, for if young people are empowered to respect and feel comfortable in their own bodies and with their bodily pleasures, they may be less susceptible to negative pressures such as coercion. Ultimately, if sexuality education programs do not acknowledge how adolescents are sexual and how they navigate their lives through democratic and technologically advanced media, they may never achieve even modest goals of reducing STD infection rates or teenage pregnancy rates.
Sexual Content on the Internet

Since schools are not providing programs that are meaningful and relevant to address adolescents' needs for information on sexuality, students must turn to other ways to satisfy their curiosities. The capabilities of the Internet for filling this void cannot be overemphasized, as research suggests that it is becoming the way for modern adolescents to learn about sex. This encompasses passive learning through viewing sexually explicit videos, pictures, and text, but it also includes an increasing number of websites directed specifically at providing basic sexuality information. Although the trend of finding sex information online is relatively new, some research has already begun to explore its extent and consequences.

Several Pew Internet surveys have approached the topic indirectly, though their findings (and those of other researchers) may be somewhat distorted due to problems inherent in research on human sexuality. Because of embarrassment or fear of discovery (especially in the case of adolescents), participants in such research are not always forthcoming about their true sexual experiences or history, skewing figures downward. Nevertheless, survey research presents the best option for achieving some level of quantitative analysis, and the Pew Internet data remains an incredibly useful source. A report from 2001 investigating Teenage Life Online (Lenhart et al., 2001) found that 18 percent of online youth said they have looked online for sensitive information and more than a quarter (26 percent) think the Internet is helpful in finding information that is hard to talk about with others (Lenhart et al., 2001). In particular, one 17-year-old boy in the sample said that the Internet is "easier, more private, and faster.... [for finding information] people might feel uncomfortable about,... [such as] health issues, sexuality
issues… or dating issues” (p. 43). For a generation that is developing sexually and intellectually with the World Wide Web at its fingertips, it seems a natural place to explore issues or concerns that may seem too sensitive to talk about face-to-face, especially with adults. According to a more recent Pew Internet survey (Lenhart et al., 2005), the percentage of teens searching for health, dieting, or fitness information online has also increased between 2000 and 2004 (from 26 percent to 31 percent). As American society relies on this technology more and more for day-to-day activities, so, too, will adolescents become socialized into this environment and utilize the Internet for activities both educational and personal.

Because sexual information and individuals’ sexual experiences are highly sensitive and personal subjects, it is difficult to assess exactly to what extent and in what ways adolescents do access such material. One study (Cantor, Mares, & Hyde, 2003) approaches the issue by surveying college students’ memories of experiencing sexuality on the Internet. Early memories often involved learning about biology and sex acts and were often negative, though it is unclear from this study whether this negativity is the result of the experiences themselves or of social factors. Cameron et al. (2005) attempt to address issues of privacy by holding anonymous, web-based focus groups on adolescent Internet-users’ (ages 14-17) experiences with, exposure to, and perceptions of sexually-oriented websites. They find that sex education information is valued “most” (percentages were not reported by the authors), especially by girls, and that “most” adolescents report that they were exposed to explicit material accidentally or unintentionally. Though some boys report intentionally searching for explicit material,
they represent a small "subgroup" of the sample. But whether positively or negatively, intentionally or unintentionally, research confirms that large numbers of adolescents are encountering sexually explicit online content.

Rideout (2002) presents a more extensive, nationally representative survey of young people aged 15 to 24 that supports these claims that the Internet has become a key source for health information for young people. The author acknowledges that the most significant sources for health information remain traditional ones, including health classes at school, parents, and doctors. However, these sources can, at times, be rendered inadequate, for abstinence-only educational approaches, the rarity of established relationships with doctors, and the sensitivity of sexual issues can make it difficult for teens to voice their concerns in such traditional contexts. Therefore, almost one-fourth (24 percent) of Rideout’s respondents reported that they find "a lot" of health information on the Internet. A full three-fourths of online young adults have used the Internet at least once to search for health information, a larger percentage than those who have made purchases, checked sports scores, or participated in chat rooms.

Of particular interest in Rideout’s (2002) study is the fact that nearly four in ten of those surveyed report they have changed their personal behavior because of health information they obtained online. Furthermore, seven out of ten who searched online for health information said they had conversations with a friend about the information, with over half (53 percent) of 15 to 17 year-olds also having a conversation with a parent or other adult. Thus, young people’s experiences with the Internet do not remain separate or disjointed, but the information or content they encounter there can and does filter into their “real” lives in a variety of ways. Their activities may even cross into the “real” world to
have consequences they do not want (such as parental involvement), and over one-third (38 percent) of the sample expressed concern that their online activities do not always feel private. Rideout presents a compelling introduction to the ways in which technology is allowing adolescents to circumvent more traditional channels of learning about sexuality.

A study by Smith, Gertz, Alvarez, and Lurie (2000) investigated the process of actually searching for sex information on the Internet. Though sixty percent of Rideout’s (2002) participants started their last health information search using search engines, Smith et al. (2000) assert that locating websites with comprehensive sexuality information using search engines is in fact quite difficult. When the college undergraduate participants entered their keywords, 63 percent of the resulting links led to pornography. Moreover, when sites with actual sexual information were found, they were often plagued by significant omissions in basic content. Searching for specific information (such as how to properly use a condom), however, revealed much more consistent and accessible results. Information on the Internet, though widespread and readily available, can often be unreliable and difficult to pinpoint, especially when dealing with a topic as sensitive and politically charged as sex.

The unpredictability of the Internet is further evaluated in Bay-Cheng’s (2001) analysis of 52 websites aimed at providing sex education information to adolescents and the values and norms involved in their portrayals of sexuality. Although the numbers of abstinence-based and comprehensive sites were roughly equal, alarmingly, almost all of the websites (95.8 percent of abstinence sites and 80 percent of comprehensive sites) employed a “sexuality as victimization” frame in the narratives they presented. Adolescent women were moreover targeted more often and more forcefully than were adolescent men.
within both types of sites with such messages of risk and fear. Bay-Cheng characterizes the sites in her sample as promoting more extreme positions, both conservative and progressive, perhaps because political and social interest groups have started to realize the Internet’s capabilities for reaching teenage audiences and created their own ideologically motivated websites. Bay-Cheng speculates that school-based sex education becomes even more important in adolescent’s lives when online environments present profuse and often conflicting viewpoints.

Information on the Internet develops democratically, and this plurality single-handedly poses a major threat to the authoritarian messages of abstinence-only sex education in schools. Everyone can perhaps agree that the root of the problem is that we do not know exactly what sexual messages teens are receiving. But while moral entrepreneurs and the federal government are endorsing an approach that essentially closes its eyes to the reality of the situation, teens are left with no educational or authority figure guide to help them navigate the murky and uncertain waters of the Internet. As a result, they end up pursuing their own path to sexual enlightenment, whether or not they actually realize the steps they are taking and in what direction they are moving.

Teen Content Creation

While online sex education information can certainly be a crucial element in an adolescent’s exposure to and experience with sex, it remains similar to other methods of information transmission (including books and teachers) in that it is unidirectional. The capabilities of the Internet encompass much more than simple information seeking, however, and it is those interactive features that are truly revolutionizing learning. The
Internet provides unique opportunities for users of all types and backgrounds to produce, disseminate, and advertise their own content to share with others. This content ranges from short postings on virtual bulletin boards to extensive multi-page websites maintained by users. This experience of creating and interacting is accessible to a degree never before seen in broadcast, print, or other media outlets, and it highlights and expands, for adolescents in particular, aspects of learning that often go unacknowledged or unrewarded in formal educational settings.

Several Pew Internet surveys have approached the topic of teen content creation on the Internet, and their findings paint an interesting picture of who is creating and why they create. According to Lenhart and Madden (2005), 50 percent of all teens and 57 percent of teens who go online (which translates to roughly 12 million young people) create content for the Internet, and most say they have participated in more than one content-creation activity, including creating a blog, creating a web page, sharing original content (such as photos, drawings, or poetry), or remixing content found online into a new creation. Lenhart et al. (2001) also notice that daily Internet users are more than twice as likely (34 percent compared to 16 percent) to report having created a webpage than their peers who go online less often, and these same heavy users do more online than their casual-using peers. These trends become more likely for older teens and teens who have been using the Internet longer. The reasons for content creation are certainly varied and multilayered, but many teens in the survey express their feelings that their activities on the Internet actually free them to be their true selves. One 16-year old boy explains, “Online, we have the mask of the computer screen. We don’t have to worry about what we look like or what other people think of us” (p. 17).
Thus, content creation on the Internet shares much in common with patterns of media consumption in that it allows adolescents to "try on" different identities, ultimately creating a sense of self that emerges through their writings, drawings, and other designs. Huffaker and Calvert (2005) point out that physical restraints, including race, gender, and age, can be more flexible in online environments, through language use and other role playing methods. Sexuality then becomes a part of both this flexibility and the ultimate creation of self for online adolescents, for as an integral part of adolescent development it must be navigated in almost all of their activities, both on and off the Internet (Calvert 2002). But because of its unique role-playing and interactive features, online content creation presents a special appeal for exploring sexuality.

Although sexuality as a function of online content creation is an even more recent phenomenon than Internet sexuality in general, a few studies have emerged examining young people's relationship with and interpretation of online sexual identity formation. An early study (Stern, 2002) of web sites maintained by young girls found that many of these websites functioned as online journals (an early form of "blogging," which will be discussed in the next section). These journals were rich sources of information on the web site authors' sense of sexual selves. Entries were usually written soon after events occurred in a stream-of-consciousness style, with detailed analyses of thoughts and feelings. Though during and since the time of this study technology has shifted the focus of many adolescents' online activities away from personal web site creation to newer tools that are less technical and easier to use (i.e., blogging) (Blood 2002), it is important to note that sexuality has been a prominent theme even in such early forms of teen content creation.
After web pages, electronic bulletin board systems (BBSs) formed the focus for much of teens’ activities as well as research on teen content creation and sexuality. BBSs are either stand-alone websites or, more often, function as part of a larger, more comprehensive site. Users register a unique “screen name” to represent themselves (and also often a picture or other customizable features), and they may then participate in a number of “discussions.” Discussions are arranged under general headings, with more specific topics under each heading. Users may post their own new topics to the group, or they may respond to previously posted topics and any comments left by other users. Comments on some BBSs are further mediated by moderators who censor postings which do not follow the rules of the board (e.g. no profanity, no pornography, or no personal attacks). Thus, an asynchronous “discussion” develops over time with the accumulation of comments and thoughts posted by individual users.

A study by Suzuki and Calzo (2004) examines postings on teen-related BBSs, one of which focuses on general health and the other on sexuality in particular. The researchers find that while teens are reluctant to seek face-to-face advice on sexuality and romantic relationships, these topics were the most frequently addressed in postings on online bulletin boards. They suggest that this popularity arises because of the Internet’s ability to avoid the awkwardness of asking such questions in person. The authors also analyze the popularity of topics by how often other users viewed or commented on them, finding that although questions about pregnancy and birth control amounted to 23 percent of the total questions posted, they received the least overall views. The authors speculate that adolescents may not want to read about others’ problems with the less glamorous or interesting aspects of sexuality. Looking at the replies that were posted, the researchers
find that the most prevalent response to questions on the boards was advice urging the poster to seek professional or medical help (i.e. “Talk to your doctor. He or she will be able to write you a prescription...” or “Your friend might need to see a real therapist to deal with this” p. 691). Responses also often included sharing personal information or stories and were emotionally supportive (i.e. “My first kiss was at eighteen...” or “I’m sure you’ll find that special person...” p. 691). In other words, online teens are engaging with sexuality both democratically and interactively by participating in creative activities such as BBSs.

Another study by Bay-Cheng (2005) also examines the use of BBSs by teens to navigate issues of sexuality. Bay-Cheng analyzes activity on two separate boards, one sponsored by the Planned Parenthood Federation of America (PPFA) and one sponsored by the Coalition for Positive Sexuality (CPS). Both organizations advocate comprehensive sexuality education, but one key difference was notable with regards to their BBSs: while PPFA’s board is moderated by editors censoring profanity and inaccurate information, CPS’s board is not. The author finds that users at both BBSs post and respond similarly to those in Suzuki and Calzo’s (2004) study—they ask personal questions, give advice, and provide emotional support—and comments also generally support the sex-positive themes of the parent websites. But while topics on both BBSs were usually initiated at the personal level through anecdotes or questions, PPFA’s discussions usually stay at this level while those at CPS often expand to encompass larger political debates. CPS users also bring up topics the author suspects would be outside the realm of acceptability at PPFA (including gender-reassignment surgery, child pornography, and pubic shaving).

Bay-Cheng attributes these differences in part to the lack of moderation at CPS, and though
this also allows occasional postings with incorrect or misleading information to pass through, she notes that other users almost always correct misinformation and provide counterarguments. Unfettered discussion may foster argumentative and confrontational discussion at times, but it also promotes critical thinking and collaboration around important issues.

Bay-Cheng’s (2005) study highlights the importance of online content creation, particularly group-based, in adolescents’ explorations of sexuality. By posting their own thoughts, feelings, and questions about sexuality and interacting with those left by their peers, young people are able to democratically encounter a multiplicity of information on, experiences with, and attitudes toward sex. Ultimately, young people have always learned in this way—by talking to their friends, hearing stories, and pursuing sexual experiences—but the Internet is expanding access to and the sheer extent of such interactive methods of learning. As schools continue to ignore the reality of their students’ lives, more and more young people appear to be turning to the Internet for answers. It is important that we examine what conclusions these young people are reaching.
THE BLOGGING PHENOMENON

What Is a Blog? Who Is a Blogger?

Technological advances are shifting the landscape of the Internet every day through more powerful software programs and faster connections. One of the most popular recent trends sweeping the Web is known as web logging, or “blogging,” though only 38 percent of all Internet users actually know what a blog is (Rainie, 2005). Winer (as cited in Ferdig and Trammell, 2004) provides a very technical definition of a blog as “a hierarchy of texts, images, media objects and data, arranged chronologically, that can be viewed in an HTML browser,” (p. 12) but it may be simpler to think of it as a sort of online journal. Often, the simplest of blogs is exactly that—a diary written by a single person who posts personal stories or commentaries online much like writing in a journal. These entries, or “postings,” can then be viewed on a single page, arranged in reverse chronological order (that is, the most recent posting first) by any Internet user. Most blogs build on this simple formula, adding extra content such as pictures or video, combining several authors who post as a group, or utilizing a variety of other features, such as allowing other users to comment on posts or linking to other stories from around the Internet. Furthermore, bloggers (as those who author blogs are called) do not only write about their personal lives (though this is still by far the most popular activity—see Lenhart & Fox, 2006), but they also track news stories on varying issues of social and political interest, spread celebrity gossip, and share the newest releases of musical artists.
Blogs share many similarities with online bulletin boards (such as their asynchronous posting style) but differ from BBSs and other online tools in several key ways. Several theorists and researchers (Blood, 2000; Ferdig & Trammell, 2004; Huffaker & Calvert, 2005; Furukawa, Matsuzawa, Matsuo, Uchiyama, & Takeda 2005; Viégas, 2005) have examined patterns of structure and user interaction in blogs, establishing a set of key characteristics. To begin with, blogs give their authors a heightened sense of ownership. Users maintain complete control of their own domains, allowing them to express ideas or share content that does not have to fit within an essay prompt or a hierarchical or topic-based discussion forum. In a world of structure and rules at school, at home, and even on other websites, this can be especially important for teenagers who need to feel they have their own private spaces. Because of frequent postings building on one another, information is archived and authors can develop and refer back to a sense of voice and personality. Adolescence, by definition, is a confusing developmental stage, and such a process of identity construction may help with navigating one’s own life. This build-up of identity may even be discernable to adolescents who read their peers’ blogs, adding a valuable outside perspective to their own lives. The hyperlinks (or “links”) embedded in blogs and the opportunities for comments or feedback available in many blogs furthermore connect them to information and people across the Internet, a feature which allows users to trace material back to its source or to further explore a story or person. This interconnected web fosters a variety of learning opportunities—such as seeing the relatedness of information or valuing primary sources—and such links can also foster relationships among bloggers and between bloggers and their readers. Thus, informal online communities are often born, usually based partially around offline peer associations but
including several “online-only” friends as well. Membership in these peer groups and the sense of belonging they provide can be very important to adolescents’ development and sense of identity. Finally, blogs, unlike personal websites, are easy to create and update, for at the most basic level they require no knowledge of computer code (such as HTML), and many blogging sites are available free of charge. This renders blogging extremely accessible, regardless of gender or age, and opens the doors for a whole generation of bloggers.

Two Pew Internet national surveys have investigated the trend of blogging in an attempt to understand who bloggers are and how they experience their blogs. *Bloggers: A portrait of the Internet’s new storytellers* (Lenhart & Fox, 2006) discovers that for most, blogging is their first foray into publication. Fifty-four (54) percent of all bloggers had not published their writing or media creations anywhere else, online or offline. Sixty-two (62) percent report that they did not have a personal website prior to starting their blog, which suggests that blogging is becoming the main portal to online content creation. Bloggers are also diverse in their thinking and interests, with nearly two-thirds of respondents saying they blog on many different topics. This coincides with conceptions of identity construction through blogging, for identity is made up a variety of experiences, beliefs, and feelings. The study confirms this approach through the responses of most bloggers that they blog to express themselves creatively and to document and share their lives. Younger bloggers (age 18-29, the youngest included in the survey) are the most likely group to claim such motivation, perhaps because they are just beginning processes of identity construction. Slightly more than half of bloggers (55 percent) say they blog under a pseudonym or invented name, while 43 percent say they use their real name. Motivations,
personal information (or lack thereof), and writing style can all be carefully cultivated by bloggers in order to achieve a certain portrayal of themselves and their personality in their writing.

Lenhart and Fox’s (2006) study also includes a related line of investigation concerning blog readership. Predictably, bloggers are far more likely to have read someone else’s blog compared to Internet users in general (90 percent versus 39 percent). It is not surprising, then, that most of the attention bloggers report receiving on their own blogs comes from other bloggers. Nearly 60 percent of bloggers had been noticed by other bloggers, with younger bloggers being most likely to report such interest. This can take the form of links connecting postings, discussions of another’s postings, or comments on postings. Ninety-four (94) percent of bloggers age 18–29 allow comments to be posted on their blogs (compared to 84 percent of age 30–49 and 69 percent of age 50–64), and 82 percent of all bloggers say they have posted a comment to someone else’s blog. Although so much traffic appears to come from other bloggers, half of the respondents believe their audience is mostly people they know, with younger bloggers even more likely than other age groups to say this. This belief may not necessarily be reliable, however, as nearly half of the sample (47 percent) also reports that they do not know the traffic statistics of their blog. Since most blogs are openly accessible on the Internet, it seems safe to assert that there exists at least the possibility of strangers reading a blog, and most bloggers probably have a mixture of strangers, online friends, and family or offline friends as readers.

A second Pew Internet study on teen content creation (Lenhart & Madden, 2005) focuses in part on blogging by teens. The study finds that one in five online teens (19 percent) has created his or her own blog. This figure may seem inconsequential at first
glance, but it roughly translates to a remarkable 4 million young Americans. Moreover, twice as many (38 percent) online teens, or about 8 million young people, say they read blogs. It comes as no surprise, then, that the authors conclude that teens are more likely than adults to either author or read blogs, which, more often than not, leaves teens’ blogs largely unsupervised and uncensored. According to this study, teen bloggers (and blog readers) form a sizable and significant segment of American adolescents, and a few demographic characteristics separate them from their non-blogging counterparts. First, teens from households with higher incomes and higher levels of parental education are more likely to author or read blogs. This reflects the financial and social capital necessary to gain access to computer and online technology. Similarly, though this survey does not investigate racial categories, it may be an important distinction, for we know that a “digital divide” separates many racial and ethnic (as well as socioeconomic) groups from achieving the same level of access to the Internet as Whites (Koss, 2001; Lenhart et al., 2003; Mossberger, Tolbert, & Gilbert, 2006). Teenagers who do have access and are involved in blogging are also more likely to have their own computers at home and to be able to use them in private spaces, with a full third (33 percent) reporting access from their bedroom. Most teens maintain a very involved role in authoring their blogs. That is, more than half of respondents (57 percent) in the study say that they update their blogs once a week or more, with close to one-third (29 percent) saying they update at least three times a week. Identity construction is a continual process, and such frequent contact (and in private spaces) is crucial for blogging to form an integral component in an adolescent’s learning and development.
Lenhart and Madden’s (2005) study also examines teens who read blogs, a sometimes hidden subgroup that is influenced by the blogging phenomenon as well. These individuals often even contribute directly to blogs through commenting on posts, emailing bloggers or contacting them online, or talking to authors offline if they know them personally. This last point is important because teens who read blogs report that they mainly read the blogs of people they know. In fact, 62 percent of respondents say that they only read the blogs of people they know, while another 36 percent say they read both the blogs of people they know and the blogs of people they have never met (the remainder read only blogs of people they have never met). Thus, teen bloggers blog not only for themselves but for an audience of friends and peers, which may impact how they present themselves and how others perceive them. Both blog authors and blog readers spend most of their time reading blogs in their friend network, furthering the importance of blogs in creating identity both for blog authors (by formalizing their positions and feelings in writing) and blog readers (by providing patterns and examples of identity construction in their peers). Teen bloggers and blog readers were also found to differ from teens in general in that they are what the authors describe as “Internet omnivores.” These teens explore, interact with, modify, and generally use the Internet to a greater extent than their less blog-savvy peers, which suggests that they may also encounter and bear the effects of Internet sexuality to a greater extent.

Though no data on bloggers of any age explicitly compares their experiences with online sexuality to those who do not author or read blogs, one item supports the idea that this line of inquiry may be productive, particularly when looking at adolescents. Lenhart and Madden (2005) note that almost twice as many teen bloggers as non-bloggers report
looking up sensitive health information online (37 percent compared to 19 percent). As we have seen, teens who blog are much more "plugged in" to the online world and its capabilities, and they may be taking advantage of the wealth of sexual content available. A correlation seems to connect teens who engage with the Internet's interactive features (i.e. blogging) and those who explore its sexual content. But since blogging also represents a mode of identity construction, we must investigate what teens are learning through this phenomenon and how it impacts their sexual identities and practices.

*Blogging as a Way of Learning*

Content creation on the web, particularly in the form of blogging, certainly represents a valuable mode of learning, for it encapsulates a new trend of knowledge creation moving away from a top-down model toward more interactive approaches. This interactivity and the experience of actually creating and publishing new knowledge and information changes how students approach learning. In fact, young people's roles as students have now been paradoxically both expanded and dissolved. The role of student has expanded in the sense that opportunities for and recognition of learning now encompass more activities by including a variety of online activities. This can range from learning about Japanese culture through a friend in an online discussion forum to reading about the latest planet discovery. But the traditional role of student has also dissolved to the extent that this role is no longer necessarily conceived primarily as a passive receiver of knowledge. We now can not only recognize but also utilize the fact that young people pursue learning and meaning-making through active and interactive pursuits—notably on
the Internet—and not solely through information collection. Because of this participation and collaboration, they may even learn more about the processes through which we all make meaning.

Rideout (2002) found in her study of teens’ experiences with online health information that these technologies and their experiences have made teens skeptical of information. Few of her young respondents (17 percent) claimed that they would trust health information from the Internet “a lot.” Though 57 percent of her sample reported that they would trust the Internet either “a lot” or “somewhat”, this remains far below trust levels for the TV news (76 percent would trust it somewhat or a lot) or in newspapers (72 percent). This distrust does not stop online learning, however; in fact, it may actually enhance it. Hird (2000) suggests that teens’ own experiences creating web pages lead them to approach information with caution, and that this thereby promotes critical thinking skills. Once teens understand that they themselves can publish a webpage containing anything from reputable facts to personal opinion to outright misinformation, they may grasp more quickly and easily the idea that information should be questioned and examined rather than blindly accepted. Blogging continues and amplifies these trends because of its popularity and heightened sense of authorship. Not only are millions of teens blogging (with more joining the trend every day), but because blogs are so personal, the experience resonates on a deep level with their senses of identity and self.

Despite the relatively recent emergence of blogging, several theorists and researchers have begun to delve into its possible educational applications and benefits. Ferdig and Trammell (2004) investigate the use of blogs in school settings, citing four key benefits of student blogging:
1. The use of blogs helps students become subject-matter experts.
2. The use of blogs increases student interest and ownership in learning.
3. The use of blogs gives students legitimate chances to participate.
4. The use of blogs provides opportunities for diverse perspectives, both within and outside the classroom (p. 16).

Writing in journals has been an activity long utilized by teachers to gain some of these benefits, including student interest and ownership in learning and widespread participation. But blogging enhances these advantages by making them more accessible, more relevant, and more useful. The connections that blogs bring—with the wealth of content on the Internet and with others’ blogs—brings a sense of richness to both the subject matter and to students’ relationships with their peers. Though Ferdig and Trammell clearly recognize that blogging can enhance the classroom experience for students in these and other ways, it is also beneficial for teachers. Individual blogs allow teachers to infer the strategies their students are using to engage with material and to address those strategies in their teaching. The authors also suggest that using the frame of links connecting web pages (including blogs) may help educators communicate to students the relationships among pieces and bodies of knowledge and the importance of context in making meaning. Moreover, blogging’s unique capability for archiving knowledge promotes reflection and analysis, which, along with the opportunity for feedback from both teachers and peers, enriches the entire learning process.

A related field of research on asynchronous learning networks (ALN) in classroom settings confirms the educational power of online learning mechanisms. ALN encompasses any teaching tool that allows students and teachers to hold entire classes online through postings written at different times by different users, much like a BBS or group-authored blog. A metastudy by Fjerrimestad, Hiltz, & Zhang (2005) of outcomes
determined in several empirical studies comparing ALN-based college courses to face-to-face classes found that ALN is at least comparable to face-to-face learning on several objective measures of student learning (including course completion rates, test scores, and overall grades). ALN appears far more effective, however, based on subjective measures of student learning, including students’ self-reported learning, perceived skill development, and interest. Also, one study (Arbaugh & Benbunan-Fich, 2005) suggests that younger groups of students (in this case undergraduate students compared to graduate students) benefit more from online learning strategies as they are more excited about technology and more experimental in their use of the Internet. Even if they do not conduct courses entirely online, educators stand to gain a lot in terms of student interest and activity by engaging with these technologies and their students’ needs.

Learning expands far beyond the confines of the classroom, however, and this is no less true when it comes to blogs. Several articles (Zucchermaglio, 1993; Hird 2000, Alavi & Dufner, 2005 Benbunan-Fich, Hiltz, and Harasim, 2005; Swan & Shea, 2005) have theorized that learning online is consistent with many characteristics of a constructivist approach to learning. Alavi and Dufner (2005) define a constructivist approach as one which “assumes that individuals learn better when they develop meaning through direct interaction with information rather than when they are told the information” (p. 192), and that two-way interaction with others (both peers and authority figures) further enhances the learning process. This forms the basis of many revolutionary approaches to both in- and out-of-school modes of education. Constructivist learning opposes the traditional “top-down” method of teacher-student instruction (referred to by Freire, 1970, as a “banking concept” of education, as it envisions students’ minds as banks to be filled with
knowledge) to encompass facets such as problem solving, collaboration, active engagement, multiple perspectives, multiple modes of representation, and reflection on the learning process. Because of the democratic, interactive nature of the Internet in general and blogging in particular, these facets become highly relevant in online learning. This also serves to highlight the fact that adolescents are learning both in the classroom and in every other context of their lives, including what appear to be social activities on the Internet.

For many teens, writing a blog underscores the ways in which social relationships present learning opportunities. Blogging allows young people to reflect on their lives and read others’ reflections on their own lives to an extent not possible before online technology. Blogging’s key features—personal authorship, archiving information, and linked networks—foster learning not only in educational environments but through social relationships navigated through the Internet. According to Bryant, Sanders-Jackson, and Smallwood (2006), online social ties can bring in huge amounts of information, especially if some of those ties reach outside of an individual’s “real world” relationships. Though the authors post that online relationships as a whole are weaker than offline relationships, they maintain that online contacts are useful because they increase the information and perspectives available to adolescents, especially when considering a topic as compelling as sexuality. Novel information—either from only online sources or from offline sources who share more personal information online—gives adolescents a huge array of outside experiences to draw upon as they construct their own understanding of sexuality.
Teens have always experienced sexuality, like all aspects of their identity, partially through their interactions with their peers. Whether this involves bragging about sexual exploits to seem “cool” or being scared because a friend says that kissing causes pregnancy, teens rely on their peers to help define sexuality and to determine their place within the sexual matrix. But now many teens are essentially sharing their personal journals with their friends (and possibly others), heightening the degree to which modern youths come face-to-face with sexual stories and scripts. Moreover, because these stories originate with their friends and can be linked to and commented on, they may form a deeper meaning and influence on a teens’ own sense of sexual self.

Huffaker and Calvert (2005) found support for this idea in their examination of language use on gender and identity construction in teenage blogs. Not only do adolescents of both sexes reveal a lot of personal information—including first name (70 percent), and age (67 percent)—but nearly half (49 percent) also mention a relationship with another boy or girl, whether dating or “crushes.” This issue forms an important pillar of teenage development and identity, so it is hardly surprising that it represents such a major topic in teens’ blogging activity. The authors note that many bloggers in the sample used their online space to discuss and come to terms with their homosexuality, and though it may take place less overtly or explicitly, their heterosexual counterparts are in fact doing the same. Moreover, teens do not view these online self-examinations as distinct or separate from their offline selves (even if they may hide certain aspects in the “real world”). Huffaker and Calvert believe that because of the considerable amount of personal information revealed and the amount of space devoted to discussing the impact and influence of real-world events, most teens view their online identities as extensions of their
offline identities. But on the Internet, this record is available for all to see, and the total
effects of authorship, reading, commenting, and linking within personal blogs and online
communities remain to be investigated.
SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

At the nexus of all of these issues—the rise of abstinence-only sex education, the effects of media on sexuality, the prevalence of the Internet, and the popularity of blogging—lies a critically important yet currently unexplored question: when schools provide little to no practical information on sex and sexuality, how are young people using interactive blogging networks as guides and exploration tools in their sexual development processes? This question is complicated on a number of levels, notably by the uneven implementation of sexuality education programs and various “digital divides” limiting access to the Internet for certain demographic groups. Those adolescents who are actively pursuing and affected by blogging in this way thus end up somewhat obscured. Nevertheless, evidence suggests that many teens are, in fact, bridging a divide between abstinence-only messages at school and sexually permissive messages in the media through their own devices on the Internet.

A critical investigation must be undertaken examining teens’ blogging activity for patterns of sexual exploration, particularly as these are shaped or enhanced by the unique features of the blog medium. Since we are concerned above all with the content and context of these blogs (specifically, their discussions of sexuality) a qualitative, rather than quantitative, approach seems more productive. Content-based research on blogs (Huffaker & Calvert, 2005; Trammell & Keshelashvili, 2005; Harper & Harper, 2006) and in the related area of online bulletin boards (Suzuki & Calzo, 2004; Bay-Cheng, 2005) has
primarily used a Grounded Theory (see Glaser & Strauss, 1967) or Content Analysis (see Krippendorff, 1980) approach for conducting analysis. These paradigms allow researchers to gather large amounts of textual data and to pull out themes, observations, and patterns to analyze the content as a whole. Though the purpose here is not to construct a theoretical framework, future research should investigate the utility of using such frameworks for coding text and information from blogs into informative categories for investigation.

Research on blogging (Hevern, 2004; Huffaker & Calvert, 2005; Trammell & Keshelashvili, 2005; Harper & Harper, 2006) indicates that, because no universal catalog exists (and because countless new blogs are created every day), it is incredibly difficult, if not impossible, to select a truly random sample of blogs. Moreover, research on teens’ sexuality is concerned with a specific age group and will likely be exploratory in its focus rather than representative. Thus, exploring one particular website portal that hosts many blogs may be the most appropriate method of procuring a sample. Though many such portals exist (and more appear every day), evidence suggests that LiveJournal.com may be the best blogging website for capturing the teenage (13-18) age group. In the Pew Internet survey on blogging (Lenhart & Madden, 2006), not only did LiveJournal top the list for all bloggers with 13 percent using this service, but it also was heavily favored by younger users, with fully 20 percent of users aged 18-29 using LiveJournal. Though this survey did not include persons younger than 18, this suggests that LiveJournal’s audience is skewed much younger, a fact confirmed by LiveJournal’s own website. LiveJournal tracks various demographic statistics (http://www.livejournal.com/stats.bml) on its members and updates them daily. One section breaks down users by age, and recent data indicate that the number of users increases steadily with age group for all teens from age 13 (the youngest age
allowed by LiveJournal to start an account) to a peak at age 19 before steadily decreasing. In raw numbers, over 1.75 million (1,759,875) users who specify age fall within the target age group of 13-18.

LiveJournal also proves an interesting source because it heavily promotes what it calls “community” blogs, defined as “journal[s] run by a member of LiveJournal for people with common interests” (http://www.livejournal.com/community/). Essentially these are blogs with multiple authors which functions somewhat like BBSs in how users introduce and respond to topics asynchronously. They differ, however, mainly in the linking between these blogs and individual users’ blogs, allowing more individual voice and community exploration to evolve. Though most posts on such community blogs are demarcated as to which user authored them, LiveJournal does also allow anonymous posts unattached to users’ names or identities. Viégas (2005) notes that such anonymous posts may form a “cathartic” opportunity for users to post questions or ideas they may be too embarrassed to discuss elsewhere. This may prove especially relevant in an investigation of teens’ exploration of sex, for it enhances the draw of the Internet’s anonymity in dealing with sensitive topics. In addition, through community blogs and the relationships established there, individual blogging for many teens at LiveJournal becomes interconnected and interdependent, more fully realizing the revolutionary interactive capabilities of the Internet than many other blogging sites.

Of course, several limitations would emerge in conducting such an investigation of teen blogging in general and of LiveJournal users in particular. First, a restriction to LiveJournal would necessarily exclude those bloggers who use other services, for though LiveJournal may be the most popular service it in no way offers a representative sample.
Teens who choose to use LiveJournal may be skewed demographically or in personality in ways that may impact research. In fact, Pew Internet data (Lenhart & Madden, 2006) and LiveJournal statistics (http://www.livejournal.com/stats.bml) indicate that its users are heavily skewed to be female. LiveJournal reports that 67.2 percent of users who specify a gender are female, and Pew Internet data note that while 22 percent of females in its survey used LiveJournal, only 7 percent of males did so. We already know, however, that any examination of teen bloggers automatically excludes many groups, including young people with little or no access to the Internet and non-blogging online teens, so this research must be understood and framed as an examination of the ways in which some teens may use blogging to explore sexuality. Though this approach precludes findings from being representative or generalizable, it can still provide an interesting picture of an important group of adolescents with implications for both further research and educational practice.

A related complication will arise when it comes time to narrow down the sample. With so many blogs to choose from, it will be difficult to ascertain those which will provide fruitful for such an examination. Not all bloggers on LiveJournal are teens, which will complicate any analysis which attempts to focus solely on teenage users. Because community blogs and the connections among bloggers foster a high degree of interaction among bloggers on LiveJournal, however, this concern may be somewhat mitigated. We have seen how learning can occur both through authoring material on one's own blog or through reading others' blogs in one's social network. Occasionally these activities even blend together when, for example, someone writes a response in his or her blog to a posting from another blog. Thus, to some extent the presence of older users still may have an affect on younger users by providing examples or giving advice or comments. Still, it may be
useful to determine which users are, in fact, part of the target age group. Studies by Huffaker and Calvert (2005) and Herring and Paolillo (2006) suggest that several methods can be used to determine bloggers’ demographic characteristics, including looking for self-reported biographical information, using indicative search terms (such as “teen” or “teenager”), and analyzing contextual clues (i.e. “I am in the ninth grade...”). As will be explained below, the use of search terms in this capacity may be somewhat limited, but explicit and implicit statements by the authors conveying demographic information will be crucial in determining not only age, but also such useful categories as gender and nationality.

The more problematical task may prove to be finding blogs and bloggers that address our topic of interest: sex. Bloggers often explore a wide variety of subjects in their writing, and though most primarily discuss their personal lives, this certainly entails more than simply sexuality (though Huffaker and Calvert, 2005, found relationships to be one of the main topics for teenage bloggers). Moreover, Viégas (2005) notes that LiveJournal is rare among blogging sites in that it allows users to articulate specific audiences for different entries. Users create lists of friends and then utilize group filters and locks to manage access to specific entries. If a particular post is blocked to a user, it will not appear at all on his or her screen and thus not seem missing. Though this may foster feelings of closeness and community within online social relationships, it may complicate any analysis of these blogs. Because of its sensitive nature, the topic of sex (including teens’ sexual experiences) seems a particularly likely candidate for such filtering. Since it will be impossible to determine when such filtering is taking place, research must simply take into account that it is examining the public discussion of sex through blogging and that further
exploration may be taking place. As for finding actual public discussions of sexuality, LiveJournal does provide an “explore” feature which allows searches of community and individual blogs. Typing the word “sex” into this search feature (http://www.livejournal.com/site/search.bml) returns 384 matches, with titles ranging from benign (“Raging Romantics”) or instructive (“Women's Health: Questions, Education, and Support!”) to explicit (“Genital Modification Group”) and even political (“Abortion Debate”). Though many of these blogs have been inactive for several months or longer—Hevern (2004) defines “active” blogs as having been published for the past two months, with at least four entries per month—those that are in current use may provide a wealth of useful content for analysis as well as links to a variety of users who may be involved in discussing sex in their own blogs.

If resources allow, Harper and Harper (2006) present an intriguing example for how blogging can be researched as part of the educational experience. Their study investigates a university class in which students are allowed to write about their learning experiences throughout the course in a blog as one option for receiving course credit. The researchers then use a content analysis approach to explore the blogs of those students who chose this option (the students were unaware of the research aims of the blogs), and they also set up focus groups at the end of the course to analyze the bloggers’ feelings and experiences. The bloggers in the study expressed a variety of positive outcomes, including feeling a sense of intimacy with their classmates, feeling a deeper engagement with the material and a greater ability to disagree or participate in dialogue, and appreciating the reflective aspects of keeping a blog. Though a multitude of factors, including age and topic sensitivity, would complicate the use of this method in analyzing teens’ sexuality
education, utilizing blogs in actual sexuality education programs seems to be an excellent method for interweaving teens' schooling and lived experiences. Research should strive to move in this direction to lead the way for educational practice to actually implement innovative programs and ideas before schools become completely out of touch with their students.
CONCLUSION

It cannot be stressed enough that the tremendous risks and dangers associated with adolescent sexuality in America make its dynamics an imperative field for investigation and evaluation. Each year, half of all new HIV infections in the United States and two thirds of all STDs occur among young people under the age of 25 (Starkman & Rajani, 2002). Also, the United States has the highest rates of pregnancy, birth, and abortion among young women in the developed world (Weaver et al., 2005). National policies promoting abstinence-only sex education programs have attempted to stem the tide of unwanted sexual consequences by limiting the school’s role in addressing sexual themes, but when teens’ lives are surrounded by sex on the television, in popular music, on the Internet, and in their own experiences and feelings, can it really be said that they are receiving an “abstinence-only” education? In his call for democratic sexuality education programs, Selverstone (2000) remarks:

All children will learn about sexuality in one way or another, from one source or another. The only choice that adults (both parents and professionals) have is whether that learning will be inadvertent or planful. Will it be solely through peers and the media, or will it also be mediated by thoughtful people in a thoughtful process? (p. 118)

If it is true that young people will learn about sexuality no matter how society admits it will teach the subject, this thesis has argued that today’s teens are bridging the many gaps between their schooling and their experiences by utilizing the Internet as a medium for exploring sexuality, both others’ and their own. Researchers, politicians,
medical professionals, and parents can longer afford to ignore the power of the Internet in reshaping how adolescents are learning, especially about sensitive and influential topics. In addition to those researchers and organizations previously noted, a growing contingent of influential professionals, including Satcher (2001), then U.S. Surgeon General, and the American Academy of Pediatrics (2001), is recognizing adolescents’ need for access to comprehensive information on sexuality. But conceptions of what constitutes comprehensive sexuality education have changed since moral entrepreneurs have changed the sex education landscape. Technology has now irrevocably fused with both education and sexuality. To be truly effective, sex education programs must engage with the Internet and its revolutionary, interactive capabilities to achieve Selverstone’s “thoughtful process” for mediating adolescent exposure to sex.

Blogging offers a variety of unique opportunities for taking advantage of the Internet in classroom settings, and, since so many teens discuss sexual issues in their personal blogs, sex education programs seem an ideal jumping-off point for utilizing the trend as a force for democratizing learning and American education as a whole. Schools should seek to employ those tools young people are already using for fun or casual activities as moderated learning experiences. More research must explore how blogging is actually used and experienced by adolescents as well as a variety of methods for introducing and integrating them into the classroom. Perhaps blogs will then truly become a revolutionary learning force, as the media has proclaimed, and adolescents will benefit from authentically interacting with each other, with sexuality, and with their own learning.
REFERENCES


