Virtual communities
An ICT activity in which learners think about the relationship between the Internet and their sense of community.
KS3 | 60 Mins | Group

KEY QUESTION: Where is my virtual community? Is the Internet part of where we live?

Background
The Internet or world wide web (www) has provided many people with another way of living their lives, and communicating. It can be described as part of our local area. It is now common to talk about the ‘virtual’ world or community, meaning our interaction with the world through the Internet. The words ‘local area’ and ‘home’ are even used to describe digital things, further blurring the boundaries of where we live. But what do we really understand by this? Where is this virtual community? Is it a safe space?

Social networking: A virtual world?
Websites like MySpace, Facebook, Bebo and Ning enable people to share photos, videos, opinions and messages from their own homes, as well as hold live chat conversations with several people at once. At the same time as being alone in a room at home, or in a classroom, a person can interact with a whole community of friends and family online, whether they too are nearby or across the world.

How safe is my virtual world?
Children and young people using search engines, email, social networking programs and blogs have raised fears in many adults, and some recorded problems. Safety, security and child protection are all issues that have implications online as well as in the real world. This means that discussion, learning and reflection on online communities is even more important, so that children and young people can develop the skills that help them navigate a virtual world.
Activities

The following activities are suggestions for exploring the idea that websites are places too. They support learners to think about the role that the virtual plays in their lives.

**Where are websites?**

How does the Internet link me to other places? Lead a class in thinking about the websites that you all visit regularly. Where are they physically based? Do you know? Locate them on a map. What patterns emerge? Use Google Earth to look at Silicon Valley, and the google headquarters.

**Social networks**

Ask learners if they know the names of any social network websites, where they can chat, post images, or message friends and family. What other things can you do on these sites? (e.g. play games – on Facebook you can build a farm by collecting virtual pieces, or a zoo, or have a fishtank!) Discuss some different views about these sites and share the word ‘privacy’ with the class (look it up together). Link back to work on ‘Who am I?’ and public and private identities.

**How does the Internet work?**

Use an image search (either as a class or direct learners in pairs) on Google or another search engine, and type in ‘How does the internet work?’ Select an image that shows the way that the Internet links your computer to other places in the world, by satellite, cable etc. Explain that the technology is very complicated, but that images can give us an idea of how where we live is connected through the Internet.

**Learning platforms**

Investigate the school’s learning platform,(Moodle, Kaleidos etc) if it has one, and discuss with the class who this is for, and who is allowed to see it. This might include talk about strangers or safety and you might map the platform to show who has access to which site e.g. the system administrator can see everything, teachers and teaching assistants can access their classes and groups, parents can access their own child’s account and noticeboards, etc etc. You will end up with a map that could represent your virtual place. You could then show this in a picture.

**Philosophical enquiry**

When you use the Internet, are you in a different place, or do you stay in the same place? Explain that this is a philosophical question, and explore through discussion, perhaps using techniques developed through Philosophy for Children (P4C).

Based on original material created by The Linking Network and Lifeworlds Learning

The Linking Network | Margaret McMillan Tower | Princes Way | Bradford | BD1 1NN
info@thelinkingnetwork.org.uk | 01274 385470 | www.thelinkingnetwork.org.uk