

# Making *realfriends* ✚

Dr. Steven Van Zoost

**So there I was, making *realfriends*.** Yes, English teachers everywhere—one word, all lower case. My students insisted. It began last October when a Grade 12 student asked if I was on Facebook. I replied with my standard, flippant response, “No, I have real friends.” Apparently, that struck a chord. I didn’t hear it at the time but a few days later, I felt the reverberations.

One student, Mitch Redden, came back to me and explained, “I was interested when you said that you have ‘real friends.’ I have more than 500 friends on Facebook, but if I had a problem, I wouldn’t discuss it with any of them... I am surrounded by people my own age here at school, and yet, it’s hard to meet new people because everyone is in their own social clique.”

“What do you want to do about it?” I asked. And that’s how it all began.

“*realfriends*” is a social action project that was created by Grade 12 students in my English class. We followed the directions of the *Imagineaction* program offered by the Canadian Teachers’ Federation. One student convinced his class, who in turn involved 240 students at our school as well as an unknown number of people beyond our school who became interested in this social action initiative. The purpose of *realfriends* was to create a face-to-face social network that would help change the school climate into a more social space. Quickly, the students acknowledged that social action projects have the potential to expand and that *realfriends* could influence people (or other communities) beyond our school.

Interest in socializing is nothing new for teenagers, but these students articulated a worry that people their age may be losing their social skills due to technologically assisted communication. For my generation, technology is understood to be a tool—something that you pick up and hold in your hand when it is useful. From my point of view, young people use technology in specific ways: to send text messages, Google, listen to music, or update their social network sites. On the other hand, perhaps my lens is outdated and technol-

ogy permeates the classroom in less visible ways. For my students’ generation, technology might be compared to an appendage, an environment, or a way of thinking. It is no longer something that is exclusively exterior to the body, but something that has invaded mental and social processes. For example, a common concern that emerged from the students was that the use of text messages and social networking sites may be deteriorating young peoples’ confidence in social settings. This worry is represented in the students’ motto for *realfriends*: stop cliquing, start connecting.

*realfriends* started as a series of socializing activities. Students planned four activities (or steps), expecting that the number of participants would double with each step. It began with 30 students who were identified by staff to represent a broad range of students in our school. At lunch, the English class facilitated the 30 participants in the first activity—“blindfolded speed-friending.” At the end of the session, people left without knowing who else had participated. They were given a plastic bracelet embossed with “*realfriends* ✚” and encouraged to look for who else in the school had one of the 30 bracelets. When they saw someone wearing a bracelet, they would know that they could safely initiate a conversation. In fact, they may have already spoken with them during the blindfolded speed-friending. Participants were invited to attend the second step and to bring a friend.

The students chose the jigsaw puzzle piece to represent the idea of “connecting” to create a network. They recreated the logo on a large bulletin board that we used to show the growing connections among participants in *realfriends*. We used the puzzle piece as an icon so that people would recognize a *realfriends* initiative.

The activity in the second step was “speed-gaming.” The 60 participants were randomly organized into small groups based on the colour of their *realfriends* bracelet. The groups moved to various spaces in the school where my students facilitated “ice-breaker” games so that the participants would get to know each other. The

third step, with 120 participants, was designed to bring people together through a common cause. The English class chose to endorse the Children's Wish Foundation and they met with the participants at lunch to educate them about this charity. The fourth step, involving roughly 240 participants, was a laughing flashmob that was used to get the attention of the school and to bring awareness to the school community about the Children's Wish Foundation.

Following these four steps, the English students published a book entitled "*realfriends: stop cliquing, start connecting*" and their story was followed in a two-part documentary. These resources are available online. You can watch the students in action by enrolling in the *Imagineaction* website: [www.imagine-action.ca](http://www.imagine-action.ca). You can also read how previous students of mine have been watching *realfriends* closely—some closing their Facebook accounts, some visiting my current class to make a pitch for *realfriends* to expand into post-secondary institutions. There was great encouragement from the participants as well as observers (inside and beyond the school) to continue expanding the face-to-face social network of *realfriends*. As I write this, I wonder who else will take up the work of these students and continue expanding *realfriends*.

There is something disquieting about students overtly wanting to talk about how to socialize. Media

often taints the reputation of teenage socialization with impressions of strange subcultures, rebellious activity, suspicious behaviour, and secretive peer communication. In contrast, it has been my experience that young people show willingness, openness, and readiness for teachers to help them develop problem-solving and social skills. Perhaps more than ever before, teachers need to model and facilitate face-to-face communication in classrooms. Perhaps because of a heavy reliance on technology to communicate, teaching, speaking and listening should not be taken lightly in our classrooms.

Throughout this experience, I have witnessed how a student-driven social action project can transform our classroom and our school. More importantly, I have witnessed how *realfriends* transformed my students. Social action projects can help students' sense of efficacy and teach students that they can solve problems, contribute to positive change, and respond to societal needs. My students have left me thinking about my own face-to-face network and the value of my real friends. More importantly, they have left me thinking about my role, and teachers' roles in general, in promoting and participating in social action.

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