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Student Perceptions of Web-Enhanced Instruction

Cherrie L. Kassem and Phyllis A. McCraw

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Abstract

In an effort to address national and state technology standards, the computer teacher at Midland School decided to teach seventh grade students how to use Nicenet, an Internet Classroom Assistant. For one marking period during spring of 2002, students used Nicenet to find assignments and follow online instructions, send and receive e-mails, post appropriate Internet links for classmates, contribute to threaded discussions, and collaborate with classmates on a group project. At the conclusion of Nicenet instruction, a researcher administered a survey to students to learn their perceptions regarding Nicenet use. Among other findings, survey results showed that most students (85%) liked using Nicenet; 25.5% of the students found Nicenet to be very helpful or useful, and 83% of the students said Nicenet improved learning at least moderately. The article suggests ways to improve instruction using Nicenet or similar Internet Classroom Assistants in the future.

Introduction

The International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) developed National Educational Technology Standards (NETS) for K-12 students in an effort to highlight the technology literacy skills students need to become lifelong learners in an information society. Among these skills are the abilities to: use technology tools to enhance learning; use telecommunications to collaborate with and interact with peers; use



technology to locate and collect information from a variety of sources; and use technology for informed decision-making (ISTE, 1998).

Many states have developed technology curriculum standards that parallel the ISTE standards. The New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standards, for example, specifically describe needed technology skills as part of the Cross-Content Workplace Readiness Standards. Among the technology skills described are the ability to access information on specific topics and the ability to use technology to make decisions (New Jersey Department of Education, May 1996).

In an effort to address the above curriculum standards, the computer teacher at Midland School in New Jersey decided to employ what Judi Harris (1998) has termed "educational telecomputing activities." Thus, the computer teacher introduced her seventh grade students to an Internet Classroom Assistant (Nicenet, www.nicenet.org) for Web-enhanced instruction during one marking period in the spring of 2002. The computer teacher decided that by the end of the marking period, students should be able to: explain the components and uses of Nicenet; find assignments and follow instructions using the Class Schedule feature of Nicenet; send and receive e-mails using Nicenet's Messaging feature; post appropriate Internet links for classmates; contribute to threaded discussions using the Conferencing feature; and collaborate with classmates on a group project using the Conferencing and Document Sharing features.

At the conclusion of Nicenet instruction, a collaborating researcher administered a student survey to ascertain students' perceptions of Nicenet use in order to improve future instruction. The purposes of this article are to describe the uses of an Internet Classroom Assistant at Midland School, to summarize the results of the Nicenet student survey, and to make recommendations for the use of Nicenet or other similar sites in the future.

Background

Midland School is a public school in Bergen County, New Jersey that serves about 500 students grades pre-K through eight. Per pupil expenditures at Midland exceed the state average. The average class size at Midland is below the state average, as is the student/faculty ratio. Students at Midland perform better than the state average on required statewide proficiency assessments. The Computer Lab at Midland is reportedly "state of the art," with all computers connected to the Internet. Most students at Midland school have computers with Internet access in their homes (New Jersey School Report Card, 2000).

Nicenet (www.nicenet.org), an Internet Classroom Assistant (ICA), was founded in 1995 and offered free of charge by a non-profit organization of Internet professionals, with server space donated by the Searle Center for Teaching Excellence at Northwestern University. Nicenet offers Conferencing, Scheduling, Document Sharing, Personal Messaging, and Link Sharing features in a low graphics environment. One of the best features of Nicenet is its ease of use. Anyone can set up a class in a very short time (about two minutes) and with little technical expertise; class administrators are assigned a class "key" to supply to students so that students can create their own accounts. The class key, username, and password protect entrance to the ICA so that only class

members can participate. Students need only find a computer with Internet access and a Web browser to use Nicenet; no software, server space, or knowledge of HTML is required. Nicenet contains no advertisements.

Uses of Nicenet at Midland School

Kleiner (1998) suggested that instructors first use the ICA as a support tool for students in on-campus courses. In that way, students can learn how the system works before using it at a distance. Accordingly, the computer teacher at Midland School decided to use Nicenet primarily for on-campus support with two classes of seventh graders during the last marking period (about 8 weeks) of the year. She told students they would be learning about a special Web site designed to facilitate communication, research, and decision making. She then explained and demonstrated Nicenet's features and showed students how to log on. Students' first task was to log themselves onto Nicenet and then to email the instructor of their success. All assignments were posted under Class Schedule, requiring students to use this feature to keep up with course expectations for each class session.

For the first assignment, the computer teacher showed students how to add a document and a Web site to Nicenet. She asked students to think of their favorite form of entertainment (e.g., video, TV, movies, music, etc.) and then to use the "Add a Document" feature of Nicenet to describe why that form of entertainment was their favorite. Additionally, she asked students to find a Web site related to their favorite form of entertainment and to submit that URL under the Link Sharing feature of Nicenet. All students were encouraged to read what other students had posted and to pursue links of interest to them.

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The second assignment was a quiz on the content of Nicenet covered to that point. The computer teacher posted on Nicenet a link to <http://quiz.4teachers.org>, at which site she had created a 7-item timed test for students on the uses of Nicenet. Results were automatically sent to the teacher, and students received immediate quiz feedback online.

For the third assignment, the computer teacher placed students in small heterogeneous groups and designated a team leader for each group. Each team was asked to choose a team name by using the Conferencing feature of Nicenet to discuss and vote on names. Lastly, teams were given the following situation about which to make a decision:

Your team gets to go out for an evening together in the local area. Where would your team like to go? How much will the evening cost? How will your team get to and from the selected place? How late will you be able to stay? Your task is to choose an evening outing that everyone can afford and that the majority votes in favor of.

You may only converse using the Conferencing feature of Nicenet—no face-to-face, email, phone, or any other interactions are allowed. Each person in the group should contribute ideas and suggestions at least six times during the next two weeks.

When your team has reached a decision, your team leader must use the “Turn in Online” feature of Nicenet to submit your results to the instructor. Good luck!

For the fourth assignment, the computer teacher posted two Web sites on locker privacy under Link Sharing on Nicenet. Students were asked to read information

at each Web site, write one paragraph summarizing each site, and submit paragraphs to the teacher using Nicenet's "Turn in Online" feature. This assignment was designed to provide background information for the subsequent assignment.

For the fifth assignment, students were asked to participate in a threaded discussion on locker privacy using the Conferencing feature of Nicenet (see [Addendum](#) for sample student work). The computer teacher posed several questions on Nicenet and asked students to respond using complete sentences and to incorporate background information from the reading assignment. Students were also asked to respond in a serious manner to at least one classmate's comments.

The final assignment involved completion of the student perception survey described below.

Student Survey Results

Students were asked to respond anonymously to a 10-item survey (see [Figure 1](#)). [Table 1](#) summarizes the survey results for items 1-7. The results indicated that a large percentage of students (85%) liked using Nicenet. Further, most students (70% or more) found that using Nicenet made class assignments clearer, made it easier to communicate with the instructor and their classmates, helped them know assignments in advance, and would be helpful in other courses. Interestingly, a rather high percentage of students (40%) reported that using Nicenet did not help them complete a group project or group discussion.

[Table 2](#) summarizes the results for survey items 8-9, which asked students to rate Nicenet on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 representing "not at all" and 5 representing "very." The results indicated that 25.5 % of the students found Nicenet to be very helpful or useful (rating 5); 36% of the students found Nicenet to be moderately helpful or useful (rating 4). Further, 15% of the students indicated that using Nicenet very much improved learning (rating 5), while 30% of the students said using Nicenet moderately improved learning (rating 4).

Item 10 of the survey asked students to make comments about using Nicenet. The most frequent positive comments included that Nicenet was fun, helpful, easy to use, should be used in other classes, made communication easier, and kept students up to date. The most frequent negative responses were that on Nicenet, assignments were confusing, some students could not get the assignments from off-campus, and some students sent annoying emails or did not participate fully in group work.

Qualitative results described by the computer teacher are included below.

With respect to students' general ability to use Nicenet features, students who were used to telecommunications were quite at home with the Conferencing and Email features of Nicenet. Assignments that involved emailing or conferencing resulted in approximately 98% participation. Although at first students were confused about the difference between "Turn in Online" and "Add a Document," the ability to distinguish between the features became easier after five assignments. Students had no trouble at all using the Link Sharing

feature; almost all of them already had favorite Web sites and posted them easily. On the Nicenet quiz, students not only performed well, they also enjoyed taking the quiz.

Using Nicenet was the only computer project all year that seemed pleasing to most of the students. They came in ready to go online and see what the assignment was. I believe that in another semester students would have begun to view the assignments and to complete some of the work before coming to class. Since most students were connected to the Internet at home, that option was available. A few students picked right up on their ability to email the instructor to ask questions from home. This, too, would become a habit for more students in time.

Grading (Pass/Fail) was extremely lenient due to the new nature of the online tool. If a student completed an assignment in any way, I gave credit. Nearly all of the students completed at least three of the five assignments. A large percentage completed all five of the assignments. Four of the 47 students completed no assignments; however, those same students completed few of the previous semester's assignments, and I therefore considered them outliers in this study. Taking that into consideration, I believe students were about 98% successful in understanding and using the Web tool, which was my main instructional objective. The problems some students experienced during the term (for example, difficulty choosing a group name or completing the group project) did not result because they didn't understand how to use Nicenet features, but rather because they lacked appropriate communication or collaboration skills.

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Discussion

Larry Cuban (2001) was quite critical about the money and time spent on computer technology in relation to the modest impact computers have had on learning. Cuban said most teachers use computers for planning, researching, record keeping, and emailing but not necessarily for instruction. The key reasons for the latter were lack of time, lack of training, and lack of teacher input in technology decisions. Cuban said teachers needed tools that were simple to use, simple to learn, motivating to students, and compatible with curriculum objectives.

The results of this study indicate that Nicenet, an Internet Classroom Assistant, is just such a tool. For most students, Nicenet was easy to use and easy to learn. A very high proportion of students liked using Nicenet and found it to be helpful as a communication tool. A surprising proportion reported that Nicenet use at least moderately improved learning. The computer teacher found Nicenet to be reliable, motivating to students, and consistent with technology curriculum standards. Although Nicenet does not have as many features (bells and whistles) as Blackboard.com or other course-building tools, its use did enhance instruction.

In this study, Nicenet was used primarily during school hours to teach students how to use an Internet Classroom Assistant. Once teachers accomplish this objective, however, Nicenet use outside of the classroom should be the next step. In this way, the use of an Internet Classroom Assistant would extend learning beyond the classroom, increasing time-on-task and positively affecting learning outcomes.

Given the high ratings on all other items, the low student satisfaction rating on

using Nicenet to complete a group project or discussion is noteworthy, especially since seventh graders prize peer interaction. As the computer teacher pointed out, this rating was primarily due to the fact that many of the seventh graders had not developed appropriate communication or collaboration skills, which made group consensus-building difficult and sometimes frustrating. Thus, one caveat to remember when using technology tools like Conferencing for group decision-making is that students must first be taught how to appropriately share their ideas and feelings with others, how to work with others in a group, and how to encourage all group members to participate fully. Otherwise, use of teletools may only compound the problem.

Overall, however, the use of Nicenet resulted in a positive learning experience in this study. Perhaps the best way to find out what technology tools work best in the classroom is to involve classroom teachers in the design and implementation of action research studies such as this one.

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Figure 1

Nicenet Survey—Midland School Seventh Grade, Group A

Please check the following items either “Yes” or “No.”

1. Overall, did you like using Nicenet?
 Yes No
2. Did using Nicenet make class assignments any clearer?
 Yes No
3. Did using Nicenet make it easier to communicate with the instructor?
 Yes No
4. Did using Nicenet make it easier to communicate with classmates?
 Yes No
5. Did using Nicenet help you know class assignments in advance?
 Yes No
6. Did using Nicenet help you complete a group project or discussion?
 Yes No
7. Would it be helpful to use Nicenet in other subjects or courses?
 Yes No

Please rate the following items by circling one number:

8. Overall, how helpful or useful was Nicenet?

Not at all Moderately Very
1 2 3 4 5

9. Overall, how much did using Nicenet improve learning?

Not at all Moderately Very
1 2 3 4 5

10. What comments would you like to make about using Nicenet (a Web-based learning environment)? (Please make comments below.)

Figure 1

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Tables

Table 1

Midland School Seventh Grade Nicenet Survey

	Number of Yes	Number of No	% Yes
1. Did you like using Nicenet?	40	7	85
2. Did using Nicenet make class assignments any clearer?	33	14	70
3. Did using Nicenet make it easier to communicate with the instructor?	35	12	74.5
4. Did using Nicenet make it easier to communicate with classmates?	37	10	49
5. Did using Nicenet help you know assignments in advance?	38	7	84
6. Did using Nicenet help you complete a group project or discussion?	28	18	61
7. Would it be helpful to use Nicenet in other courses?	34	12	74

Table 2

Midland School Seventh Grade Nicenet Survey

	Percent of Students		
	Not at all	Moderately	Very
1. Overall, how helpful or useful was Nicenet?	15	60	25
2. Overall, how much did using Nicenet improve learning?	17	68	15

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Addendum

Threaded Discussion on Locker Privacy

[[Post Message to "Locker Privacy"](#) | [Create New Topic](#)]

- [Date Limit:](#)
- [Message Layout: View Summaries Only](#) | [Print View](#)
- [Sort Order: Newest on Top](#)

[[Edit](#) | [Delete](#)]

FROM: P.M. (05/28/02 5:27 PM GMT -06:00)

SUBJECT: Locker Privacy

[[Reply](#) | [Send a personal message to P.M.](#)]

Locker privacy seems to be an issue with most teenagers. Should officials be allowed to search your lockers whenever they deem it necessary? Why or why not?

REPLIES (2): [Hide Replies]

FROM: B.A. (05/31/02 12:30 PM GMT -06:00) [Send a personal message to B.A.]

SUBJECT:

[Edit | Delete]

I agree with J.S. because if they have drugs they can get high off of it. They can do something crazy like rob a bank or even kill them self. I also disagree with J.S. because they could have things that is personal to them that they want anybody to know about.

FROM: N.P. (05/31/02 12:35 PM GMT -06:00) [Send a personal message to N.P.]

SUBJECT:

[Edit | Delete]

I will also have to agree with J.S. and J.M. Lockers are a very personal safe, but if a report of drugs is found in the school premises. On the other hand, Only certified officials should be able to do a locker check.

[Edit | Delete]

FROM: J.S. (05/30/02 6:22 PM GMT -06:00)

SUBJECT:

[Reply | Send a personal message to J.S.]

I think student officials should be allowed to search a locker if deemed necessary. I feel this because if drugs were present, it would be for the best of the child(ren) and the school to have the drugs redeemed and disposed of. However, the school must have clear and numerous pieces of evidence before a search is conducted. Also, school is meant to be a place to learn, and more importantly, a SAFE place. Therefore, all violations should be pounced on and dealt with immediately, so the school environment can remain a trusted and

secure place for all children.

[Edit | Delete]

FROM: J.M. (05/31/02 12:33 PM GMT -06:00)

SUBJECT:

[Reply | Send a personal message to J.M.]

I think i agree with J.S. Locker searches should be done if there is a valid reason for the search. Otherwise a search would not be warranted. School officials should give the student SOME locker privacy but if the need arises, if god forbid something happens and lockers need to be searched it should most definately be allowed. The only reason a child would really

seriously want to keep their locker private was if infact they were hiding something. So for many children this should be a pretty similar feeling on this subject.

REPLIES (1): [Hide Replies]

FROM: J.S. (05/31/02 12:39 PM GMT -06:00) [Send a personal message to J.S.]

SUBJECT:

[Edit | Delete]

That's a good point J.M.. The only thinkable reason for a student not to want his/her locker to be checked was if they were dong something wrong and violating a school policy.

[Edit | Delete]

FROM: R.M. (05/31/02 12:38 PM GMT -06:00)

SUBJECT:

[Reply | Send a personal message to R.M.]

J.S. and J.M. are right. The school should be a safe place, and with locker searches, it is. The lockers should be searched by higher faculty members of the school. Also the officials should only search the lockers if necessary. If locker searches are not necessary then what's the point.

[Edit | Delete]

FROM: M.B. (05/31/02 12:43 PM GMT -06:00)

SUBJECT: YOU ARE WRONG

[Reply | Send a personal message to M.B.]

THEY SHOULD NOT BE ABLE TO CHECK LOCKERS , BECAUSE IF THEY DO PEOPLE WOULD GO TO JAIL AND ALL YOUR PERSONAL ITEMS ARE IN THEIR.

YOU GUYS ARE WRONG.....

REPLIES (1): [Hide Replies]

FROM: B.A. (06/12/02 6:55 PM GMT -06:00) [Send a personal message to B.A.]

SUBJECT:

[Edit | Delete]

I agree with matt.

[Edit | Delete]

FROM: M.B. (05/31/02 12:44 PM GMT -06:00)

SUBJECT: ALSO

[Reply | Send a personal message to M.B.]

ALSO YOU HAVE "VALUABLE" ITEMS IN THERE...

REPLIES (2): [Hide Replies]

FROM: C.C. (05/31/02 12:55 PM GMT -06:00) [Send a personal message to C.C.]

SUBJECT:

[Edit | Delete]

M.B. no one is going to try and steal your stuff if it is a simple locker search. And the only way people could go to jail is if they did something wrong.

FROM: B.A. (05/31/02 12:58 PM GMT -06:00) [Send a personal message to B.A.]

SUBJECT:

[Edit | Delete]

I DISAGREE WITH YOU C.C.

[Edit | Delete]

FROM: C.B. (05/31/02 12:44 PM GMT -06:00)

SUBJECT:

[Reply | Send a personal message to C.B.]

I also agree with everyone. Students usually argue with locker searches by stating that they should have their privacy and that the higher authority has no right to go through their personal belongings. But as long as the search is reasonable and can be backed up with reasons for doing so, then it should be allowed.

REPLIES (3): [Hide Replies]

FROM: B.A. (05/31/02 12:46 PM GMT -06:00) [Send a personal message to B.A.]

SUBJECT:

[Edit | Delete]

YOUR WRONG

FROM: B.A. (05/31/02 12:47 PM GMT -06:00) [Send a personal message to B.A.]

SUBJECT:

[Edit | Delete]

If they have no proof that there is things in there that they need to check then they shouldn't be allowed.

FROM: J.M. (05/31/02 12:58 PM GMT -06:00) [Send a personal message to J.M.]

SUBJECT:

[Edit | Delete]

Actually it is a matter of opinion. For 1 locker searches should only be done with a VALID reason. School officials WILL NOT steal your valuable items it is just a SAFETY check so that you don't endanger yourself or other school mates.

[Edit | Delete]

FROM: C.C. (05/31/02 12:49 PM GMT -06:00)

SUBJECT:

[Reply | Send a personal message to C.C.]

IF there is any evidence or suspicion about drugs or guns in students lockers than officials have a right to know.

REPLIES (1): [Hide Replies]

FROM: B.A. (06/03/02 3:52 PM GMT -06:00) [Send a personal message to B.A.]

SUBJECT:

[Edit | Delete]

I agree if they have evidence then it would be a good idea otherwise then i dont they should.

[Edit | Delete]

FROM: N.D. (05/31/02 12:56 PM GMT -06:00)

SUBJECT:

[Reply | Send a personal message to N.D.]

I agree that lockers should be searched by school officials. This is very important because drugs and other such items may appear in a students locker and student officials will not know about it. It is important to have lockers checked, and besides the point if the students dissagree then

the officials will become very suspicious and demand a chack.

REPLIES (1): [Hide Replies]

FROM: B.A. (06/03/02 3:56 PM GMT -06:00) [Send a personal message to B.A.]

SUBJECT:

[Edit | Delete]

True! But some kids can feel like they cant put things in there locker. I dont want to be feeled like I have privacy.

[Edit | Delete]

FROM: C.F. (05/31/02 12:56 PM GMT -06:00)

SUBJECT: Locker secrecy

[Reply | Send a personal message to C.F.]

I think that it is right for the school to search the locker ONLY if there is a suspicion that there is something harmful in that student's locker. Therefore they shouldn't be able to search a locker without any reason to.

[Edit | Delete]

FROM: C.C. (05/31/02 12:57 PM GMT -06:00)

SUBJECT:

[Reply | Send a personal message to C.C.]

Officials need to know if there is anything going on in the school and the things in lockers can offer tipoffs as to what is going on and if there are any crimes.

[Edit | Delete]

FROM: M.A. (05/31/02 1:00 PM GMT -06:00)

SUBJECT: the lockers...

[Reply | Send a personal message to M.A.]

Searches of lockers, and any belongngs really, is an act of safety. In the United States, yes, you do have a right to privacy. But the policy of safety overrides the policy of privacy. If you are not doing anything wrong, then why not allow the officials to search? The only reason you shouldn't want them too is if you are

doing something illegal. Therefore, the search is entitled and correctly so. When they deem it necessary and suspicion does arise, then safety overrides all. The safety for yourself and others around you is at stake. And the officials are not purposely attempting to go through your stuff, they just want to make sure you are being safe and following school rules and policies. Anyway, why would you do something to arise suspicion anyway?? It is your own fault, then, if you are hiding something and therefore get in trouble for it. You shouldn't do it in the first place!!!

REPLIES (4): [Hide Replies]

FROM: J.S. (06/01/02 9:40 AM GMT -06:00) [Send a personal message to J.S.]

SUBJECT:

[Edit | Delete]

EXACTLY! Safety must come before privacy because it's not only one person's safety at risk, but the whole school's.

FROM: B.A. (06/03/02 4:10 PM GMT -06:00) [Send a personal message to B.A.]

SUBJECT:

[Edit | Delete]

Its my property they are not allowed to touch it.

FROM: J.S. (06/04/02 12:39 PM GMT -06:00) [Send a personal message to J.S.]

SUBJECT:

[Edit | Delete]

Yes they are allowed to touch it if they think it is causing a threat.

FROM: B.A. (06/04/02 2:16 PM GMT -06:00) [Send a personal message to B.A.]

SUBJECT:

[Edit | Delete]

It is still my property and if I dont want them to touch it then I wont allow it.

[Reply | Send a personal message to M.A.]

[Edit | Delete]

FROM: J.S. (06/01/02 9:38 AM GMT -06:00)

SUBJECT:

[Reply | Send a personal message to J.S.]

I agree with bits and parts of all of your's and there are obviously many great reasons. I think we all agree that the bottom line is that they should check lockers if there is a clear reason and if students resist it only means they are hiding something, and Matt, these guys are school officials. Why would they want to steal something? I think it would be easy to identify the school official if he/she stole something, so that wouldn't be a problem (since they wouldn't be able to get away with it).

[Reply | Send a personal message to J.S.]

[Edit | Delete]

FROM: P.M. (06/03/02 4:01 PM GMT -06:00)

SUBJECT: Locker Privacy

[Reply | Send a personal message to P.M.]

I think that school lockers should be ckecked by officials whenever they think it seems neccessary. There may be drugs present, which may be a hazard to the children in the school. There may even be explosives or firearms in the locker which may do harm to students, teachers, and staff working in the building.

[Reply | Send a personal message to P.M.]

[Edit | Delete]

FROM: B.A. (06/03/02 4:02 PM GMT -06:00)

SUBJECT: Hey

[Reply | Send a personal message to B.A.]

I disagree w/ everyone who feels that lockers should be check a locker should be private to have things in there that they want know one to see.

REPLIES (1): [Hide Replies]

FROM: J.S. (06/04/02 12:40 PM GMT -06:00) [Send a personal message to J.S.]

SUBJECT:

[Edit | Delete]

If you have something that is that personal in your locker, WHY WOULD YOU PUT IT THERE IN THE FIRST PLACE.

[Reply | Send a personal message to B.A.]

[Edit | Delete]

FROM: P.M. (06/03/02 4:16 PM GMT -06:00)

SUBJECT: Locker Privacy

[Reply | Send a personal message to P.M.]

I agree with J.S. and J.M. because even though in the United States we have the right to privacy, people still try to smuggle drugs and firearms into schools and public places. So, I think it is essential that we keep locker inspections in

schools for the safety of students, teachers, and staff in school.

REPLIES (1): [Hide Replies]

FROM: B.A. (06/12/02 6:50 PM GMT -06:00) [Send a personal message to B.A.]

SUBJECT:

[Edit | Delete]

I disagree because if we have a right to privacy, then why should they be allowed. There is a law about property right. So why are they going to touch my property. The only one person who disagrees with me the most is J.S. So what do you have to say about that.

Huh!

Addendum

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