Engaging Students in Learning through Social Networking: users' perspectives

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Keywords: *social networking sites, new technologies, student learning*

Introduction

The aim of this study is to show the impact of social networking sites (SNS) on students (including international students). Social networking sites are one of many technologies in a fast changing Web 2.0 world. They are very popular among the so-called '*Google* generation' and are used for both social communication and learning purposes. Being an international student, I had benefited from using different social networking sites that helped me to connect with family and friends. The discovery that they benefited my studies as well, led me to a research interest in them . The social networking site *Facebook*, currently one of the most popular, is considered in this paper. Users' views about the social networking sites were investigated using online and face-to-face ethnographic interview techniques, using a sample size of five university students who were SNS users and familiar with other learning technologies. Their views are highlighted and various learning technologies with social networking technology are discussed and compared.

New Technologies

In today's world the opportunities of using C&IT in education are many. With the emergence of Web 2.0 technologies , the opportunities for educational use are increasing in many repects. Young Internet users are using different learning technologies, such as podcasts, blogs, SNS etc. for educational, as well as, social purposes. We are experiencing the popularity of 'second life' virtual environments in delivering lectures and courses, which may in many cases be more popular than traditional real-life classroom. According to Selwyn (2007), 'the educational role of the worldwide web has been cast in a new light by the emergence of so-called 'web 2.0' technologies and, in particular, 'social software' where users are connected to and collaborate with each other in a variety of group interactions (Shirky 2003)'. Students report that one of the most common topics of conversation on the social-networking scene is education. This is well supported in the research literature. A report released by the National School Boards Association (NSBA) and Grunwald Associates LLC, shows that 96 percent of students with online access use social-networking technologies. Nearly 60 percent of these students report discussing education-related topics online, such as college or college planning, learning outside

of school, and careers. And half of online students say they talk specifically about school-work.' (www.eschoolnews.com, 2007)

Some learning technologies that are relevant to s social networking sites are discussed briefly here (see Kelley 2007a, 2007b; Seta & Guiseppe 2005):

Podcasting : A podcast is very similar to any recorded radio show, but it is distributed over the internet. As a result, listeners can enjoy it whenever they like. Software applications such as *iTune or iPodder* can be used to subscribe to any podcast. Many students, nowadays, are using podcasts, and according to one case study participant (who was interviewed online): 'Podcasts can be very interactive, where we have the opportunity to comment or give our own feedback and that is what I like about it'. Podcasting is generally used by students and professionals because it is an effective way to distribute different materials that are useful for one's learning, including video, image, and songs. Moreover, unlike other virtual learning technologies technologies, podcasting is a 'push' technology, where the materials are sent to the subscribed members, which is helpful.

Weblogs ('Blogs'): A blog is a particular website where we can find materials or links for different entries (word document, graphics, video etc.). Blogs can consist of text, audio or photos and are very similar to online diaries where writers add their personal ideas, creativity and knowledge. There are different websites for different kinds of blogs. Blogs can work as a learning technology for students and they can benefit by using related blogs from different sites.

The difference between blogs and SNS is that in social networking sites students add their own ideas, comment or give feedback on any post, share their ideas within different groups, where they have lots of interaction within friends and other group members. In blogging sites, group work can be done, but according to three of the five students interviewed they do not have the same appeal as a SNS. On the other hand, students can also share different blogs on SNS.

E-mail: If learning is greatly affected by interaction, we cannot ignore the impact of email technology. Through email facilities we can send group-emails which is very fast and cheap. Modern e-mail systems offers users the chance to exchange personal or group messages, as well as the possibility of various collaborative tasks. As a result, educators are interested in implementing this technology in e-learning programmes.

A participant in this study, who is a regular user of email, shared his views as follows:

> *In case of other learning technologies, we have to remain online and sometimes it is expensive for us. But, in e-mail facility we can have both on-line and off-line interactions, where we need to stay online only during the downloading of materials or messages, and then can study off-line.*

Thus email technology is popular among its users for being an easy, fast and cheap process. Another benefit in using e-mail as a learning technology is that, it can be used on a one-to-many, as well as on a one-to-one basis. As a result, maintaining communication between a tutor and a student, tutor and students and among students become easier and cheaper.

Social networking sites and their implications for learning

Social networking sites are a web-based services that allow users to create public, semi-public or private profiles. There are many SNS - *Facebook, Bebo, Myspace* and *Orkut*, among them. They are popular as a platform for social communication.

Smith and Peterson (2007) highlight the educational potential of SNS. They believe that

> *'knowledge is not constructed in an individual vacuum, but in the communication and exchanges embedded in social networks... by telling another classmate what the professor covered in class, the student has an opportunity to further process the information, even restructuring it within their thoughts. Social support may include supporting emotions as much as providing task-related information. In fact research shows that more task and emotionally related conversations within groups are linked to higher final grades.' (Smith and Peterson, 2007, p.279)*

Although social networks arrived after blogs, they reach a much wider audience. Online learning facilities through SNS give students 'the benefits of "freedom of speech", the freedom to express an opinion and to publish work. In addition, the benefits of being able to interact, discuss, comment and share their ideas' (Lance, 2006). As a result, students are comfortable sharing information or knowledge in this platform.

In the article *Online Cool on a Budget*, Gordon and Stephens (2006) discuss various ways educational institutions can make proper use of SNS tools. They point out that 'any service with a large number of users deserves to be looked at more carefully' (p. 49). They emphasise that educational institutions need to think 'outside the web site box' and try to integrate into the online community where the students are. Abrahm (2008) comments that '*MySpace* and *Facebook* combined are reported to cover more than 85 percent of all students in high school through college. They are connecting to each other-and not just casual connections but sustainable, global connections for life'. According to his study, students who use *Facebook* feel more connected to campus.

The most important feature of SNS is that they have the ability to treat users as co-creators, not as passive consumers of knowledge. Its 'just in time- any time' approach makes the learning truly global. E-learning through social networking could thus be used as a cost-effective way to deliver information and enhance the learning process. When I interviewed a student on-line, I asked her why she prefers using a SNS rather than podcasts or blogs, she replied:

Most of my friends are on a particular social networking site, where we can discuss anything and everything, we can even share different links of podcasts or blogs among us. So, I don't mind using podcasts, emails or blogs, but I really prefer being with my friends on a same platform, which is a SNS that works as a medium for all other links.

According to one university student (interviewed online):

Sometimes I find virtual classrooms bit boring. My friends are not there, they just don't use those groups. That's why I am using SNS with all my classmates, and I like to be there.

Thus connecting with a social group is a major driver for the use of SNS. We should think about utilising the popularity of different SNS to reach where the students are. Smith and Peterson (2007) say: 'We would contend that these applications are worthy of close academic scrutiny - not least in order to gain a clearer understanding of their social and cultural significance in the contemporary digital age' (p.278).

Interestingly, SNS can be used as a platform for course management:

'With Facebook, most students will already have accounts and know how to navigate the site already, so there will be fewer barriers to their adoption and use of a Facebook-based courseware system... It seems likely that at this pace of development, Facebook users will keep adding applications to take advantage of new technologies and as a result, students will definitely get the opportunities for their educational development' (Jones, 2008).

Using SNS for email and chatting, students create related groups for learning communities, and subject areas. The 'push' and 'pull' feature is stronger in SNS than for email systems. According to a participant in the study:

I email my friends from Facebook - the all-in-one! Now I don't use my other email accounts as frequently as I used them before.

Social networking sites also have question and answer facilities for users. There are applications such as *My Questions* where students can ask any question they need to know, and other users can reply the question. During exams or assignment writing, peers or classmates, friends or teachers can support students by providing important feedback , ideas or notes through SNS.

Almost all the participants in this study stated that they have teachers and classmates in the friend-list of their SNS and that they share education-related issues with them.

Facebook as an educational social networking site

Among many other SNS, *Facebook* is one of the most popular sites. Like other social networks it allows people to communicate with friends and exchange information. It is similar in concept to a print yearbook, where users can place a photo of themselves on their page and include information about their interests. *Facebook*, however, is far more sophisticated than a print yearbook. It allows users to create online networks of friends and join or create groups of like-minded individuals.

Figure 1 : A discussion group in Facebook, discussing course-related topic

As with other SNS, *Facebook* has different applications that are being used by the students in their learning. It has applications such as *Notes*, *Wikimono*, various study groups, *Share homework*, *Courses*, *Podclass*, etc. Using *Notes*, any one can post notes to other *Facebook* users.

One interviewee in this study was very positive about *Notes*:

> *We even share our class lectures through this application. If I miss any of my class, my friends send me the important topics discussed in the class, through this application.*

Wikimono can be regarded as a Wiki in *Facebook*. Students can create pages, and can control the access of users in those pages. Although they cannot upload any type of document, they can share the links for their documents by using *Wikimono*. *Study Groups* can be used to share files, have chats and discussion. While doing this study I discussed my topic with the others in the group and they gave me ideas and support where necessary. They shared their experience as social networking site-users and from their experience I gained more ideas. By using the application called *MyQuestions*, students can create, send and discuss any question with their friends, peers or teachers and with different group members. It is like a discussion board operating on a 'push' instead of 'pull' basis.

One international student's comment on her use of *My Questions* was:

> *If I get stuck any where, or I need feedback on any of my research topics, I share all my problems with my peers and also with my supervisor , by using this application. I have lots of friends using this application, and they are of great help when I'm in problem* [sic]. *It's like getting support any time and on time.*

Examples of other useful tools that can be used in *Facebook* are *Podclass, Our Notes, Knowledge Book, Flashcards, Bookshare,* and *Visual Bookshelf.*

Teachers need to change their role to help their students learn in the best way they can by recognising their needs, and how and where they access knowledge. Instead of restricting their access, teachers need to encourage skills in which learners seek new information and consider alternative viewpoints.

Problems in using SNS and the recommendations for practice

Although offering many benefits, social networking through Internet has various types of problems associated with its use. There are real concerns related to users' privacy. For example, law students in Canada filed a legal complaint against *Facebook*, after examining its policies and practices as part of their degree course:

> *'University of Ottawa students have alleged that the social networking site fails to inform members about how their personal information is disclosed to third parties for advertising and other profit-making activities and that it does not get permission from users to do so, according to CBC News. They claim it has committed 22 violations of Canada's privacy laws.'* (Times Higher Education - News Briefing, 12 July 2008).

During my virtual ethnographic interview, three of the five students showed their concern about the unsafe disclosure of personal information through social networking sites.

Other problems need consideration (see Hewitt & Forte 2008), such as students not wishing to share their social space with teachers or other students, especially when there may be hierarchical relationships; or students who are spending an excessive amount of time online may be lacking healthy engagement in major areas of life. Unruly students may post sexually suggestive material or try to make connections with others for sexual intentions. Moreover, 'at-risk 'youth could make connections with inappropriate people to discuss and share information, which could result in a shared belief in the appropriateness of potentially harmful activities.

When I interviewed one university student regarding SNS problems, he responded this way:

> *We do not use our social networks more than a limited period of time in a day or in a week. For example, it is never more than one hour per day. We do not use unnecessary applications through the social networking sites, like, vampires*

or werewolves in Facebook. Any student can use this technique to save their precious time. It is all about consciousness and planning.

By developing information literacy to ensure users are aware of the implications of use of *Facebook*, and the techniques for managing the environment (e.g. privacy settings), identity theft and such related problems can be prevented. A full review of Internet-use management policies and practices are preferable to banning the use of SNS which students use anyway. By doing proper risk assessment and risk management, analysing potential dangers and making plans for such contingencies, we can prevent many problems.

Conclusion

It is evident that social networking site can allow students and teachers to interact in an environment where students tend to like being. There are some risks and drawbacks associated with educational use, but if teachers, supervisors or instructors plan measures to control these risks and discuss these issues openly with the students, they could contribute significantly to students' education.

Educause (2006) puts it well: 'Any technology that is able to captivate so many students for so much time not only carries implications for how those students view the world but also offers an opportunity for educators to understand the elements of social networking that students find so compelling and to incorporate these elements into teaching and learning. '

Thus, if we can ensure that we will use social networking sites with proper planning and understanding, they can be of great use to learners and teachers.

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