

Using social networking spaces for education : Issues and recommendations

Zuochen Zhang

University of Windsor, zuochen@uwindsor.ca

HyeRan Park

OISE / University of Toronto, parkhyeran@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper discusses social networking spaces and their uses for educational purposes. With increased accessibility to computers and the Internet, online social networking spaces, also called social networks, social networking sites, or social media, such as blogs, Facebook, MySpace, wikis, and Twitter are widely used by people of different age groups. Many studies have been conducted on different aspects of social networking spaces, including the potential use of these spaces for educational purposes. Research shows that there are both benefits (e.g., community of practice, motivated participation) and drawbacks (e.g., privacy and safety issues) attached to the educational use of these spaces. Based on an extensive review of relevant literature and the authors' experiences and observations, this paper first briefly explores the features of some most commonly used social networking spaces, and then presents a review of literature on the educational uses of such spaces, and pedagogical values of them, followed by the authors' reflections pertinent to the use of social networking spaces for teaching and learning. It is hoped that the discussions and recommendations presented will help educators of secondary and post-secondary levels raise awareness of the pedagogical values and make proper use of social networking spaces.

Key words

Social networking spaces, educational, pedagogical values, teaching and learning, social media

1. Introduction

1.1. Theoretical background and research questions

With the increased number of computers that are connected to the Internet, more and more people have access to the online spaces. Besides communication channels such as email, instant messaging systems (e.g., MSN Messenger, Yahoo Messenger, Google Talk), and online chat rooms, social networking spaces, also called social networking media, social media, or social networking software, such as Facebook, MySpace, blogs, wikis, and Twitter have users from all walks of life. A study by Grunwald Associates (2007) of nine-to-17-year-old students shows that 96 percent of the research participants with online access have experiences of using social networking technologies. The authors suggest that "Educational leaders should work with social networking companies to increase services that are explicitly educational in nature, via informal or

formal initiatives that highlight educational offerings” (¶ Striking a Balance – Guidance and Recommendations for School Board Member). Baird and Fisher (2005) argue that “Social networking media provides the opportunity to take the social interaction to deeper levels as well as address learning styles rooted in digital technologies” (p. 8) and suggest that social networking media can engage users in the learning content and actively participate during doing social interaction, knowledge exchange and cognitive development. Boulos and Wheeler (2007) examined the applications of Web 2.0 in the context of health service and education and assert that there is a need to raise awareness of Web 2.0 tools and the possibilities they offer. They argue that there is an urgent need to conduct quality research to inform better use of Web 2.0 applications. Smith (1996, 1999) gives a brief introduction to theories about andragogy and some characteristics of adult learners, who are more self-directed and apt to organize learning around their experiences, which could be interpreted that social networking spaces that provide the freedom of self-direction can be employed as a useful tool for adulterly learners.

1.2. Research questions

The paper was guided by the following research questions:

- What are the pedagogical values of social networking spaces? And
- How can social networking spaces be best used for teaching and learning?

2. Methods

This paper is a review of literature related to the topics of social networking spaces, including a brief description of some most commonly used social networking tools (sites), benefits and issues concerned with the use of these tools for teaching and learning. Based on the literature review and the authors’ experiences and observations, some recommendations are offered for educators at secondary and post-secondary levels.

3. Results of literature review

Field and Spence (2000, p. 35) argue that “social capital can offer both a complement and an alternative to education and training as a means of attaining both individual and group goals”. They believe that :

high levels of trust and strong networks can be associated with a tendency to promote informal learning through members of the family or neighborhood or workforce... it could be hypothesized that in certain circumstances, high levels of social capital will foster high levels of informal learning and low levels of participation in formal education and training. One key ingredient in the equation will then be the extent to which education and training systems themselves are an embedded aspect of the networks and trust which provide such effective resources in attaining group goals. Instead of a simple linear model, a more complex set of alternative relationships are available. (p. 35)

The “read-write web” (also called the “social web”) is a place where readers have the opportunity to become writers, publishers, producers, and directors (Wheeler & Wheeler, 2009, p. 2). And unlike the first generation Web, a great deal of Web 2.0 activity and correspondence occurs on mobile devices, with no clear

distinction between being online and offline. Wheeler and Wheeler (2009, p. 2) claim “It is imprudent to ignore the social web because it enables students to participate in new forms of literacy that contribute towards collective knowledge”.

Huber (2010) provides insight that supports the use of Web 2.0 tools as a venue for educators to tailor a sharing of resources, posting personal thoughts and responding to questions that provide opportunities for sustained professional conversations around teaching and learning. Considering Grossman et al.’s (2001) views on a teacher learning community, there must be more than a superficial social element of participation in conversations that goes deeper into an intellectual realm. This involves a type of “discussion brokering” where participants contribute to group discussions, but also engage in questioning and critiquing of thoughts that are being shared, for the main purpose of learning together (Grossman et al., 2001, p. 979).

With the interactive nature of social networking spaces, they can be viewed as an environment that facilitates access to a population of geographically dispersed users consisting of a wide variety of expertise. Glynn, Huge and Hoffman (2012, p. 118) who did a study with Facebook users at a US university on factors related to news use on Facebook and argue that “social networking sites will certainly play a large role in how citizens share information”. Wright (2010) states that one of the identified benefits of using Twitter to promote and share their own work, led to a sense of community being developed. Shirky (2008) refers to social network users as operating in small groups as part of a community that is subdivided into small but densely connected clusters of people sharing certain values. Usually, in social networking, the principle of homophily applies, where people associate with other groups of people who are mostly like themselves (Yardi & Boyd, 2010). Grossman et al. (2001, p. 50) maintains that teacher communities “work most smoothly when teachers self-select into groups of like-minded colleagues”. A revisit of Grossman et al.’s (2001) elements of an effective teacher community indicates that a community allows for a sharing of resources for others’ learning, clarification of thoughts and the building of ideas through group discussions, and a willingness to critique to further collective understanding.

Ebner et al. (2010, p. 93) describes how this communication can foster “process-oriented learning due to the fact that it can allow continuous and transparent communication” which supports a social constructivist approach to learning. The learning process becomes transparent and as a result can benefit others who participate in the communications. Members of social networking spaces do not make equal contributions in posting messages. That is, about half of them just “lurk” and read others’ postings (Preece, Nonneck, & Andrews, 2004), but that does not necessarily mean those who do not actively participate do not learn anything in the community (Beaudoin, 2002).

Studies show that younger people are more actively engaged in the use of social networking spaces, and such spaces are useful more for social than learning purposes. Roblyer, McDaniel, Webb, Herman, and Vince Witty’s (2010, p. 138) study on the use of social networking sites (SNS) by college students and faculty found that 95 % of students reported having a Facebook account while only 7 % faculty did, but students and faculty shared the perception that the SNS was the least-commonly used technology for instructional purposes. And they suggested that even though their research participants mostly perceived Facebook as a tool for social rather than educational, people’s “attitudes toward technologies tend to change over time.”

Among social networking spaces, blogs, wikis, Facebook and Twitter are more constantly found to be mentioned in studies related to the pedagogical values of such spaces. The original uses of weblogs, or blogs,

were mainly for the publication of simple, online personal diaries. After being used in different domains for a variety of purposes, blogging has evolved to have the capacity that can engage people in collaborative activity, knowledge sharing, reflection and debate (Hiler, 2002). For educational purposes, writing a blog forces a student to confront their own opinions and contemplate how their views might be interpreted and reflected upon by others (Mortensen & Walker, 2002). Academic literature documented how graduate students use blogs for their academic development (Freeman et al., 2006), and the use of blog for English language learning (Blackstone, Spiri, & Naganuma, 2007). Based on their literature review, Williams and Jacobs (2004) conclude that “blogs have the potential, at least, to be a truly transformational technology in that they provide students with a high level of autonomy while simultaneously providing opportunity for greater interaction with peers (Summary and conclusions, ¶ 4). In a paper that shares their practice in a teacher education program, Zhang, Tousignant and Xu (2012) stated that they encouraged their teacher candidates to create blogs as an online space to complete case studies in small groups, and they also introduced wikis as useful tools for language students to do peer editing. They observed that most of their teacher candidates had their own Facebook profile for social purposes, but some also used it for their professional development and networking.

Twitter (<http://twitter.com>) is a web-based tool that has been described as a “premier microblogging site” (Small, 2011, p. 872) as well as a social networking application bringing together multiple audiences into single contexts (Marwick & Boyd, 2010). Twitter users have appropriated this medium to “reflect whatever use or style of communication they want” (Mischaud, 2007, p. 40). A content analysis study by Mischaud (2007) demonstrates that 58 % of Twitter users are going beyond a simple sharing of what they are doing by using the medium to send messages to other people known by the user, publish one’s personal viewpoints and thoughts, and to share news-like information with others (pp. 23-25). He contends that participants have realized the flexible use of this medium and have adapted the technology to reflect a style of communication that addresses the innate human desire to converse with others (Mischaud, 2007). Twitter has provided a medium for a new form of collaboration and communication through conversations (Ebner et al., 2010; Grosbeck & Holotescu, 2008; Honeycutt & Herring, 2009) by allowing for conversations among educators following collaborative learning structures and transformational learning theories. The notion that educators are discussing topics of their own choosing that relate directly to their experiences, provides opportunities for educators, who might feel isolated in their schools, to explore the values and perspectives of other educators, across the globe.

Literature on pedagogical values of social networking spaces shows that such spaces can be used for education purposes at different levels and subject areas, but a more in-depth understanding of the relationship between the use of social networking spaces and learning can be found in the discussion of Christine Greenhow, who says that ““What we found was that students using social networking sites are actually practicing the kinds of 21st-century skills we want them to develop to be successful today” (Brindley, 2012, ¶ 11), which means that educators should not only view the pedagogical value of social networking spaces in specific learning contexts, but also the educational outcomes the use itself brings about.

When discussing educational benefits of social networking spaces, it is undeniable that concerns and issues also exist. It seems that younger people, especially teenagers are more enthusiastic about using social networking spaces, such as MySpace and Facebook, but spending a lot of time on these tools does not mean the users really have adequate literacy in terms of how to protect their privacy online, which is a concern

when we think of younger people using social networking spaces (Livingstone, 2008). It can be agreed upon by educators that, if used properly, social networking spaces have many potential benefits to their users, educators and learners included. However, it should be borne in mind that social networking could “provide a rich setting for criminal activities and other misdeeds” (Weir, Toolan, & Smeed, 2011, p. 38), such as cyber bullying and identity theft. It is important for teacher to be aware of the potential dangers of the social networking spaces. Of course, with the potential problems existing, it does not mean that young students should be prevented from using social networking spaces, because “as teachers, we must embrace the paradox embodied by social networking, rather than opt for panic and place yellow police tape around the entire realm that promises to have impacts on the workplace and the polis (Maranto & Barton, 2010, p. 44).

4. Discussion

The authors of this paper both have used various social networking spaces for educational purposes, and from their own experiences and observations, the social networking spaces have certain pedagogical values, and different spaces may demonstrate different pedagogical values. For instance, blogs can serve the purpose for journaling, so teachers and students can use blogs for idea sharing and reflections; Facebook, even though as aligned with findings of the reviewed literature, is mostly used for socialization, has the potential to get students engaged so as to keep members in the “community” informed of the updates of their friends, and also help build a rapport between faculty members and students; Twitter, because of its “briefness”, is found to be specifically useful for members to share ideas and carry on discussions on their commonly interested topics. We noticed that these spaces are more useful for post-secondary and higher grades of secondary school students than for lower grades, In an online environment, because of the lack of non-verbal cues, it is uncommon that misinterpretations of postings take place, so users of these are advised to observe netiquettes of online communication, and use specific tools for specific age groups and learning purposes.

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