

Is There a Role for Social Networking Sites in Education?

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Abstract. Social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace have become popular among millions of users including students of all ages. There are ongoing discussions over the potential of these sites to support teaching and learning, particularly to complement traditional or online classroom activities. This paper explores whether social networking have a place in teaching and learning by investigating how students use these sites and whether they find opportunities to discuss study related activities with their peers. Two small scale studies were carried out in a face-to-face undergraduate course in Singapore and students enrolled in a face-to-face Master's programme in Brazil. Data were collected using surveys and interviews; findings were mixed. Many of the Brazilian students used social networking sites to both socialize and discuss their studies while the Singaporean students used such sites for social interactions only. The paper discusses these differences and offers suggestions for further research.

Keywords: Social networking, informal learning, support

1. Introduction

The concept of Web 2.0 surfaced out of the potential for interconnectivity and interactivity offered up by the Internet ([1], [2]). In terms of software, tools generally include blogs, wikis, podcasts, second life and social networking, a mix of new and longer established programmes [2]. In terms of application, Web 2.0 is often associated with collaborative, user-generated content which is often open to the world, and normally free. This has transformed the way many people use the Internet and the associations they may make with it [3]. It has also led to considerable interest across all sectors of the education industry [4].

Social networking sites (SNSs), for instance, have attracted millions of users worldwide [5]. Individuals use these SNSs to interact with others they have met offline or to meet new ones, though there is some evidence that they mostly support

existing social relations [6]. Nevertheless, by visiting a friend's space, one can easily expand his or her network [7] and thus establish new relationships. Such sites enable users to connect to wider distributed members; they are emergent, self-organised, and generate less homogenous contributions [8]. Anderson [8] argues that SNSs can be used effectively to expand learning beyond course-based groups. Such expansion may include a network of peers, teachers, professional experts and other communities [4]. Researchers believe these sites can be used to complement traditional and online classroom activities ([9], [10]).

Sites such as Facebook and MySpace are popular among students [11] and, although not created for educational purposes [9], it is argued that they may encourage informal dialogue and knowledge sharing, mediated by the students themselves ([8], [12], [13]). Conrad [14] adds that with such technological advancements, students are likely to learn as much from social networking sites and blogs as they are from their assigned tasks and textbooks in the class. Selwyn [15] observes that most of the learning taking place in Facebook is the kind of learning that would have happened, for instance, in the school corridors, canteens and phone conversation after class. This suggests an informal learning that rests in the hands of the students which is not classroom-based or structured [16]. This is more in line with Vavoula's [17] definition of unintentional informal learning in which the goals of learning are not specified in advance but can develop as learning opportunities arise.

Despite its potential, there is clear lack of research to address whether SNSs can be used effectively in education ([7], [9], [13], [16], [18]). It is therefore vital to understand the way students are using these tools and their expectations in relation to their learning ([19], [10]). This paper contributes to the growing discussion on the role of social networking sites in education. It seeks to explore to what extent University students are using social networking sites to engage in study-related activities and whether they benefit from these exchanges.

2. Background

Social software can be largely characterised as software that supports group interactions - email, discussion forums, SNSs and applications such as wikis and blogs ([20], [8], [7]). For example, studies show that students have used Facebook for fun, to kill the time, to meet existing friends or to make new ones ([6], [21]). A study at the University of Minnesota found that only few students were aware of the academic and professional networking opportunities the sites provided [22]. In Palmer et al's [21] study, students primarily used Facebook to maintain a satisfactory social life, though some organised course related activities on it.

Shukla [23], on the other hand, suggested that graduate students of biology discussed course topics in Facebook ranging from cell development to residency programme. Similarly, Meulemans and Chu [24] found that the majority of students on a graduate programme used both Myspace and Facebook to communicate with others about school, instructors and courses. JISC Report [25] indicated that 73% of the students used social networking sites regularly to discuss course activities with members. Among these, 75% felt that such sites were useful to enhance their learning.

Selwyn's [15] research on undergraduate use of Facebook suggested that the nature of student interaction was profoundly informal and often at a tangent with the official learning objectives of instructors. JISC Report [25] indicated that when learning is initiated by students it can be seen as more social and may not be perceived as learning. The report also showed that students were clearly mixing social networking sites with study-related activities. In the same vein, Anderson [16] reported that students tended to look at course materials in the Learning Management System (LMS) but discussed its content using Facebook. The author also indicated that a lecturer found it easier to join students on Facebook to discuss a week's coursework than trying to use the Institution LMS. This suggests a shift to students making decisions about which tools best suit their needs and how to use them ([4], [12]). It is therefore vital that educators reflect on the learning affordances offered by such sites [13].

3. Context and Participants

This study is based on two case studies. Study 1 was conducted in a 12-week face-to-face undergraduate course delivered in a teacher-training Institute in Singapore during fall semester 2008. The course goals were to provide students with an understanding of how theatre can be used as a means of intervention, development, empowerment and expression in fields outside of the theatre as traditionally conceived. All students enrolled in the course agreed to participate in the study (n=13). The sample comprised of 11 females and two males. Most of the students (85%) fell within the 20-25 age group. The majority of the students (92%) had considerable experience with computer use. The same percentage indicated they spent, on average, more than three hours per day using the Internet, with one participant spending between 8-10 hours. All students had Internet access both at home and at their school.

Study 2 was conducted in a face-to-face Master's programme in Education taught at a Brazilian University located in a regional area in the South of Brazil. The programme focused on policies and educational processes. Students (n=22) were randomly selected from a cohort of 71 to take part in the study. The sample was comprised of 17 females and 5 males. The age range of the sample group was 20 to 45, with 45% within the 20-25 age group. Regarding computer use, 77% had some experience, 18% a lot and 7% had extensive experience. All students had Internet access at their school while 73% had Internet at home. On average, 77% of the students spent between 1-6 hours per day using the Internet. A few (14%) did not use the Internet daily and 9% used between 15-30 minutes daily.

4. Methodology

This study adopted a survey design [26] to obtain information on students' usage of social networking sites and activities. The survey was the most appropriate approach because it allowed convenient collection of data using a consistent approach. The

survey had a mixture of open-ended and closed questions, multiple choices, though it included more open-ended ones. The smaller the sample, the more open the survey can be [27], which allows greater opportunity to gather more in-depth responses. The same survey was administered to students in both countries. Each teacher delivered the survey to students using the email tool. Data were collected at one point in time [26]. All participants in both studies returned the survey. In addition to the survey, a semi-structured interview was conducted by email with five students within each study who were randomly selected. The objectives of interviewing a small sample were to understand students' experience of using social networking sites in greater depth [28] to both enrich and complement the data gathered from the survey.

Analysis of closed questions from the surveys consisted, as suggested by [27], of assigning a code number to each question. After developing a code frame, a spreadsheet was used to organise the data and process the responses for each study. The next task was to engage in meaningful analysis. Percentages for each of the quantitative variables covered in the survey were calculated.

Qualitative data were analyzed inductively (open-ended questions and interviews) based on Merriam's [29] suggestion in which category construction begins by reading the documents and making notes on the margins of the text that seemed to address the study aims. Coding was performed across the documents. The next step involved grouping the notes and identifying categories so that data could be coded. After coding the data, themes relating to the use of social networking sites and activities were explored.

5. Findings

This study first investigated whether students enrolled in a higher education course and Master's programme were members of SNSs. Out of 13 Singaporean students, 12 were members of at least one SNS. Among these 12, 67% used Facebook (with 33% using it regularly, and 25% often). Most of the students (85%) said they also used other SNSs (with 54% using it regularly and 8% often). Meanwhile, the majority (92%) said they never used MySpace. The student who did not use SNSs had concerns over the time involved and the purpose of social networking. Within the Brazilian group, two students were not members of SNSs explaining that they were not interested in these sites and did not have time for it. Among those who were members (n=20), 85% used Orkut (with 9% using it regularly and 59% often). More than half (64%) also used other SNSs (with 32% using it often). Over 90% did not use the well-known sites Facebook and MySpace.

5.1 Purpose for Using SNSs

Figure 1 displays students' purposes for using SNSs for the Singaporean students. It suggests students used these sites primarily to socialize. A significant percentage (42%) used SNSs to both keep in touch with friends and 'have fun'. As seen, only a small percentage used SNSs to exclusively keep in touch with friends.

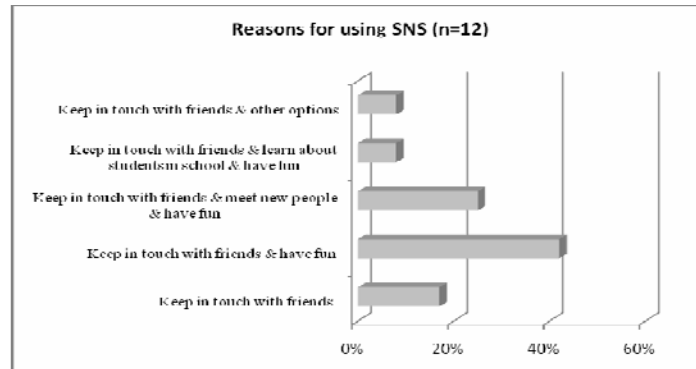


Fig. 1. Students' reasons for using SNSs within the Singaporean group

All five interviewees confirmed they used SNSs to keep in touch with friends. One explained that "...I can be updated on what goes on in the lives of my friends, especially if we rarely meet as they can upload pictures of themselves, which I can view as well." Another, in particular, also used SNSs to find new friends. The Singaporean students further indicated what they most liked about SNSs. For example, 42% liked SNSs because they allowed them to be in contact with their friends. Thirty three per cent liked to post photos while a few (17%) liked to view their friends' photos, with one saying "it is a good way to keep up with them and get updated with what goes on in their lives." However, despite their popularity among students, 25% felt SNSs lacked privacy and 17% said people, who they do not know, wanted to be their 'friends'. Other things students did not like about SNSs included: too many applications, the sending of bulletins, lack of human touch and receiving junk mail.

As displayed in Figure 2, the Brazilian students had multiple reasons for using SNSs. Only a small percentage used SNSs exclusively to keep in touch with friends.

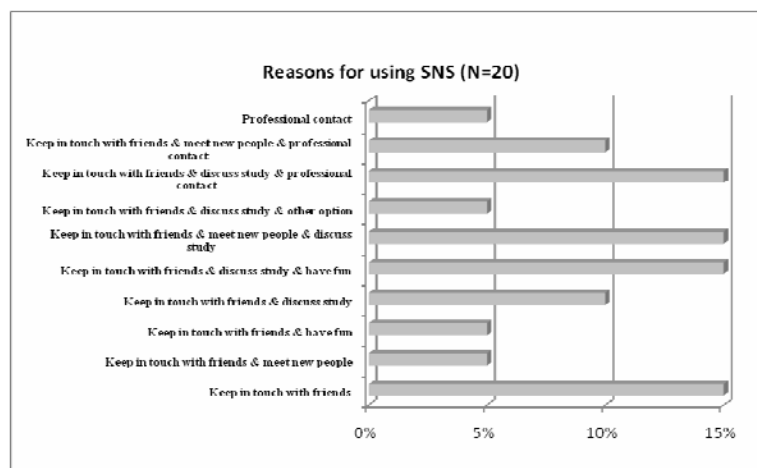


Fig. 2. Students' reasons for using SNSs within the Brazilian group

Comparing Figure 1 with Figure 2, an immediate conclusion is that the second group did not only use SNSs for socializing but also to discuss study related activities. Figure 2 also suggests that some students used SNSs to make professional contact. Two participants, for example, said they used these sites to exchange work related messages with other members.

All interviewees confirmed they became members of SNSs to keep in touch with friends and saw this as a major benefit. They added that they used SNSs to discuss study related activities with members. Students further explained what, in particular, they liked most about SNSs. For example, 40% felt they could interact with members who lived at distant locations while 25% found it an easy way to communicate with others. Being able to interact with a diversity of people, read relevant messages, chat with friends and make new friends were also mentioned. One, in particular, saw a benefit in that the sites were free to use. Despite the positive comments, 40% of the students felt there was lack of privacy in SNSs and 25% said that other people may copy information on their sites (e.g. photos and messages) and use this in inappropriate ways.

5.2 SNS Activities

The primary activity performed by 75% of the Singaporean students was to post photos to SNSs. This was followed by 67% posting messages. A few (17%) also used SNSs to chat and to send files. Other activities included challenging each other on games, add friends, look at photos and friends' profile. None of the Singaporean students seemed to have exchanged information, ideas or resources about their studies with other members through joint membership of SNSs. All five interviewees confirmed this. One, however, observed that although she did not talk about course content via SNSs, she discussed with members possible meetings for group projects. Four students pointed out that they had class colleagues as SNS members, but they did not discuss study related activities with them.

Students from Singapore had mixed opinions whether SNSs should be used to discuss study related activities. Half indicated these sites should be used for social exchanges only while the other half felt they should be used for both social and study exchanges. All interviewees said they would not like to discuss their studies via SNSs. Three of them saw SNSs as a place to relax. One explained: "...these social networking sites are a means for us to distress away from work and hence, we tend not to discuss work on these sites...[we] would instead take part in more relaxing activities such as viewing pictures of friends." Two interviewees felt there are many distractions within SNSs such as chatting with other people and games that would interfere with study related discussions. One suggested this may lead to producing work with poor quality. One student, in particular, mentioned that discussion forums and educational websites are more suitable for study related discussion. Another added that face to face encounters would be a better option.

As for the Brazilian students, the primary activity performed by 90% was to post messages. This was followed by 45% posting photos. Some (35%) also exchanged information, while 20% posted reminders (including professional and academic ones). Other activities included participating in debates, "having fun" and making new

friends. Analysis also showed that 60% of the students had exchanged information, ideas or resources about their studies via SNSs. For example, 43% said they benefited from discussing group work with members. One remarked that the discussions helped the group move forward with the activities. Twenty nine percent said they benefited from exchanging bibliographies and web sites for their studies. A student exemplified this by explaining that she was pointed to new literature in her field of inquiry. The same percentage (29%) also mentioned that the discussions via SNSs helped them to better understand course topics and get ideas on how to proceed with assignments.

Through the interviews, the Brazilian students confirmed they had discussed their studies via SNSs. Three of them indicated they exchanged ideas related to the disciplines in which they were enrolled. One, in particular, was able to improve her assignments based on suggestions given by her peers via the SNS. Another exchanged bibliographies, sites and other materials for a particular class. All interviewees had class colleagues in the SNSs as members. One, for example, had all her colleagues from one course in her list of friends. All interviewees indicated that interactions with peers were important to share knowledge about course content and to keep them up to date with assignments, with one saying that such interactions contributed to her learning on topics being studied.

In contrasting to the Singaporean group, all the Brazilian students agreed that SNSs should be used for both social and study related exchanges. All interviewees held similar opinions. One, for instance, believed “that everything that contributes to social or study is important. These sites can be used as a tool for learning. With such a busy life, technology contributes to keep in touch with course colleagues and we can discuss assignments and activities related to our studies.” Another felt that using SNSs exclusively for study purposes would have a reduced number of people as members. In her view, SNSs should be open to different forms of interactions including study activities.

6. Discussion

This paper aimed to investigate whether students used social networking sites (SNSs) to discuss study related activities by exploring two cases within higher education. The outcomes of this study offer mixed results. As with Palmer et al’s [21] findings, the Singaporean group clearly used SNSs primarily for social interactions. In contrast, and agreeing with other studies ([25], [16], [24]), a significant number of the Brazilian students used SNSs to both discuss their studies and socialize. However, the two groups shared two common themes: (1) SNSs were popular among most of the students and (2) they used these sites to keep in touch with friends.

A possible explanation for the results obtained might be related to access to learning resources. The Brazilian group was affiliated with a University located in an inner region far away from any big cosmopolitan centre. It is possible that access to libraries, conferences and other educational centres were not easy available to this isolated group, meaning they might need to travel long distances to use such facilities. Many may have used SNSs to obtain support from members for their studies. Indeed, 60% used SNSs to exchange resources, information or ideas with members, a point

confirmed in the interviews. Another possible explanation might be that the Brazilian group did not have so many opportunities for face-to-face encounters. In light of this, they may have taken advantage of SNSs to interact and discuss course activities. This could be the case as 40% said they liked SNSs because they were able to interact with distant members. This, however, requires more research. Moreover, it was clear that the study-related exchanges occurring in SNSs were self-organized by the Brazilian students, agreeing with others' findings (e.g. [8], [13]). It seems that such exchanges happened informally and, referring to [15], were similar to those discussions taking place in the school corridors or canteen where students offer suggestions, bibliographies and organise group work. This study shows that many students felt they benefited from these exchanges in the SNSs. Further research should investigate in depth how much learning happens.

The Singaporean students, on the other hand, clearly preferred to use SNSs to interact with their friends, and as some suggested in the interview, to "relax." It is possible that these students used other means to discuss their studies such as other technologies. They may have had more access to learning resources such as libraries and bookshops and more opportunities for face-to-face meetings as they may have been physically near to their colleagues. Perhaps, an additional reason could be that these students lived more stressful lives than the Brazilians, who are known to live in a more "laid back" society. Thus SNSs might have been a way to "stress out." Moreover, it could well be the case that due to cultural differences, the Brazilian students had stronger sense of community and took more advantage of SNSs for study purposes. Finally, it could be that the Singaporean students may have not seen value in using SNSs for study purposes as suggested by a few in the interview. Research could investigate more deeply the reasons for these students not using SNSs to discuss their studies.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion and despite the limitation of the sample size, this study has, nevertheless, suggested that there is a place for SNSs in education. It has shown that many of the Brazilian students were, in fact, using SNSs informally to complement their course activities. Perhaps, SNSs may play a bigger role in the lives of students' living in regional areas where access to learning resources are not always easy or long distance becomes an issue. SNSs may suit these students' needs because they are free and easy to use. However, not all Brazilian students were members of SNSs nor used them to discuss their studies. Perhaps, what is needed is to develop awareness among such groups that SNSs may be used as a learning tool.

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