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ONLINE AND DISTANCE EDUCATION

Social Networking



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Social networking is a term in common use only since 2003. The term has been defined by many and generally viewed as referring to networked tools that allow people to meet, interact and share ideas, artifacts and interests with each other. Social networking applications have been phenomenally popular with sites such as Facebook, MySpace, SecondLife and LinkedIn counting their user numbers in the tens of millions. Social networking to date has found applications primarily in the contexts of informal learning and entertainment however there is growing interest in its use in formal education in face-to-face, distance and blended modes. I have refined the definition of social networking and especially that used in distance education as *networked tools that support and encourage learning through face-to-face and online interactions while retaining individual control over time, space, presence, activity and identity* (Anderson, 2006). Key to understanding both the power and the disruptive affordances of social networking is what Dalsgaard (2008) refers to as transparency — making visible and retrievable the activities, ideas, communications, artefacts and interests of others.

Pedagogical rationale for use of social networking in all forms of education has steadily been increasing for over 100 years. This rationale extends from social cognition theories, (Vygotsky, 1978) through social learning (Bandura, 1977) to social constructivism (Bruner, 1986), all of which emerged as driving forces for educational design and development in the 20th Century. In this century, these rationale have been strengthened by developments in connectivism (Siemens, 2005), complexity theory (Horn, 2008), theories of cooperative freedom (Paulsen, 2008) and heutagogy (Hase & Kenyon, 2000). Each of these pedagogies stress the value of social interaction in motivating, modeling, validating, supporting, challenging and providing new perspectives throughout the learning process. These theories also acknowledge the central role of technologies in supporting human communication and in finding, retrieving and distributing information.

There are many different network learning applications. Some are generalised and multi-faceted application systems that combine social networking applications including blogs, wikis, profiles, resource tagging, documents sharing and other

services. Conversely, there are specialised social networking applications focusing on particular applications such as language learning, meeting people who live near by or those who share common interest, hobbies or goals, scheduling and many other applications. The web 2.0 aggregation site <http://gotoweb20.net> currently lists over 2,800 applications — most of which could be classified as social networking applications.

For e-learning applications social networking serves three broad functions which I refer to as socialising, sharing and sojourning.

- **Socialising:** Many forms of distance education and their e-learning derivatives have focused on the provision of content to students and provided only limited contact between student and teacher and often no opportunity for student-student interaction. This lack of social interaction, help seeking and provision, and lack of general interpersonal communication and support opportunities has been associated with lack of social integration and resulting higher levels of attrition in both distance education and e-learning (Kember, 1995; Rovai, 2003; Tinto, 1987; Woodley, 2004). Of particular concern in modern e-learning is the inability of institutions to provide contact information to fellow students owing to restrictions on release of private student information to other students. Thus, it can easily happen that students enrolled in the same course, living in the same apartment building, have no opportunity to connect with each other for mutual support, engaging in 'study buddy' or study group type interaction, engage in cooperative or collaborative work or to build social

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networks and social capital with other students. Social networking first allows learners to find each other by browsing the profiles of other learners. Profile systems encourage learners to share their interests, aspirations, locations, hobbies, past course completions, photographs and other personal information.

Typically systems provide hot links that provide easy electronic access to other students who share these interests or characteristics. However, it is critical that students have control over the release of this personal information (Anderson,

2009). Some social networking applications require wide distribution across the entire Internet to be effective, whereas some information can be effectively shared in restricted subsets such as registered students at an institute, those in a particular class, programme or club or even particular 'friends' of that

student. There is no single best permission setting, rather students need to be able to set, and change as necessary, the extent of the distribution of personal information and content they create.

- **Sharing:** One of the most common informal and formal learning applications of network software is the capacity to store, organise and annotate network resources. These include favourite web sites, photographs, music, travel recommendations, references, books and many other electronic resources that people want to be able to quickly retrieve, annotate and share with others. If these resources are stored in accessible networked locations and tagged or identified by the user, they can be combined with other people's resources to create aggregated collections. These collections allow users

to discover what others have found, to rate and comment on these resources and generally add value to the individual collection by collective aggregation (Dron & Anderson, 2007). These shareable resources need not be restricted to those created by others. Rather resources created by students and teachers such as learning diaries (blogs), student created learning resources (portals, wiki contributions, original music, multi-media art, reports and essays) can also be shared. These collections need not be bound to particular courses, cohorts or even institutions. Rather they can be used to create permanent, yet continuously growing and evergreen resources as they are used and augmented by multiple groups of learners and educators.

- **Sojourning:** I refer to the final “s” function of social networking in e-learning as sojourning. To sojourn means to travel or work with others. There is ample evidence from both classroom delivery and distance education at all levels of formal education that collaborative and cooperative learning increases learning effectiveness, motivation, persistence and develops interpersonal and communications skill collaborative (Fisher, Phelps & Ellis, 2000; Gokhale, 1995; Johnson & Johnson, 1994; Kaplan-Leiserson, 2003; Kaye, 1991; Kreijns, Kirschner & Jochems, 2002; Shindler, 2004; Springer, Stanne & Donovan, 1999; Stacey, 1999). However, providing collaborative learning opportunities for distance education students has, until the development of networking software, always been inconvenient, restrictive and often expensive (Paulsen, 2008). Social

software allows groups of students to efficiently schedule their activities, meet online via text chat, audio, video or immersion technologies and to engage collaboratively in a variety of brainstorming, mind mapping, group games, simulations, project management, and other types of organisational, administrative and learning activities.

Challenges of utilising social networking in e-learning

Like all technologies, the use of social networking presents both opportunities and challenges to educators and learners. Of course, social networking requires easy access to the Internet and some applications (notably immersion

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technologies such as SecondLife) require high speed connections and relatively advanced computer hardware. In addition, some educational institutions and workplaces actively discourage or block access to social networking sites in mistaken attempts to constrain learner exploration and use of these potentially distracting tools. Secondly, social networking is new and novel and can challenge students’ and teachers’ network and computer efficacy, and their capacity to easily adapt to new learning tools and contexts. Thirdly, social networking is a very disruptive technology (Christensen, 1997; Christensen, Horn & Johnson, 2008) that challenges many of our notions of privacy, individual and institutional control – generally moving control from the institution and the teacher to the learner. Fourthly, social networking provides tools that can be used for plagiarism, cheating, harassment and other types of academic and social misconduct. None of these challenges are insurmountable, but they highlight the

challenges of rapid and wholesale implementation and point to the need for pilot projects that guide adaptive policies, training and support development.

Using social networking effectively

The use of social networking evolves a process of exploration and learning for all participants. Many of the technologies and their applications are emergent, meaning that it is impossible to predict in detail what will be the outcomes of their use. However, the potential advantages described above give promise that social networking learning designs will prove more effective, efficient and motivating ways to support learning than any previous forms – including both traditional campus based and distance education. Thus, educators should be piloting educational applications in their courses to provide opportunities for themselves and their students to explore and evaluate the effect of social networking tools use on their formal and informal learning. Many social networking tools are open source, can be used in trial applications or with advertising support at very low or no cost. Educators should however note the pervasive interest in busy and often

instrumental learners in being rewarded course credits for their use and learning with these tools – thus suggesting development of compelling but optional and graded activities that enhance e-learning and face-to-face courses. Finally, educators would create ways in which learners can help each other to learn and overcome logistical, technical, institutional and learning challenges. It is unrealistic to expect the high degree of institutional support for these emerging technologies as we have attempted to provide for earlier administrative and educational technologies. However, by guiding and facilitating the use of social networking to encourage learners to support each other, we can create largely self-supporting and cost effective learning communities.

Further support

The Internet abounds with individuals, communities and resources, in many formats, that can be used to learn about and garner support for social networked teaching and learning. The listing below provides a very tiny subset of these resources and a set that will be out of date by the time you read this printed text. Nonetheless, it provides starting points for further exploration.



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