Social Networks from Higher Education Students' Perspective

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Abstract

In recent years, emerging social network sites are reshaping the ways that people communicate, interact, collaborate, work and even learn. Based on the idea that social networks can be a powerful and effective tool for instructors and students, this study was conducted to reveal students' perceptions about social networks from different perspectives. Hence, students thoughts on this topic were solicited via open-ended questions posed through an online survey which was announced via several social networks. The findings indicated that the sharing of materials and personal thoughts, the increase in the flow of knowledge, and online communication and interaction were perceived by students as the characteristic features for knowledge acquisition and socialization in online environments. Furthermore, socialization and interaction, the reinforcement of social links and communication, alongside information sharing and the gaining of knowledge were listed as the main benefits of using social network sites. It can be concluded that the new generation likes to communicate in social environments and that they also value the information they gain during this process. Thus, this environment should be considered as a learning environment in order to improve the quality in the communication process of our students. Hence, use of these environments should be integrated into the curriculum, especially for teacher education programs.

Keywords: *Social networks; higher education.*

1. Introduction

In recent years, numerous social network sites have emerged and these sites are reshaping the ways that people communicate, interact, collaborate, work and even learn. Moreover, Murray (2008) states that social networking and software has transformed the way people communicate and share information with one another in today's society. To give some perspective to this notion, according to the statistics of some companies the time each user is spending on social networks has increased by two or three times in the last two years. People of all ages are joining social networks for different purposes, but they are really huge in numbers. The extraordinary growth of social networking sites has attracted much attention, since individuals are sharing their private lives and connections in detail with a wider number of people. Furthermore, social network sites have become important vehicles for sharing up-to-date news and events.

Based on these facts, educational applications of social networks are also growing in popularity and are being used in the pursuit of a wider diversity of subject areas. As Hargadon (2010) also mentions, "This new web is going to dramatically alter the 21st century landscape in education, shaping how students approach learning, how educators approach teaching, and, increasingly, how educators are interacting with, and learning from, each other." (p. 2). Hence, there are definitely a considerable number of learning and teaching activities, as well as efforts being invested in the use of social networks to achieve

desired learning outcomes. However, research studies regarding "which tool", "for what purpose" and "why" in the emerging field of the use of social networks for educational purposes is less prevalent, its usefulness often somewhat dubious (Molka-Danielsen & Destchmann, 2009). Thus, this paper aims to discuss the issues that educators need to consider to effectively design and manage learning experiences in diverse social networks.

2. Some Definitions of Social Networks

Hamid, Chang and Kurnia (2009), have defined online social networking as "a range of activities enabled by social technologies and operationalised by a group of people" (p. 419). Moreover, Jones and his colleagues (2010) have declared that "Social software is not about technology or a computer system. It is an ideal that drives the student/educators to reflect on their learning and teaching practice" (p. 782). Boyd and Ellison (2008) also defined social network sites as web-based services that allow users to create a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, and share and view a list of other users with whom they share a connection within the system. Hence, social network environments allow their members to organize their personal and professional profile and share it with other members within the same or other networks.

The key concept in social software sites is "social content" such as photos, sound clips, bookmarks/urls, video clips, presentations or other type of media. These social objects can be used, shared or produced via many applications. With these new technological developments, new applications for sharing (e.g. Flickr, YouTube and Slideshare), new services for supporting content production, communication and collaboration (e.g. blogs, wikis and micro-blogging services such as Twitter), and social networking sites for connecting people and supporting different communities of practice (e.g. Facebook, Elgg and Ning) are emerging (Conole & Culver, 2010).

3. Benefits of Social Networks

Murray (2008) states that social networking provides new opportunities for personal expression, the creation of interest communities, collaboration and sharing. Similarly, Minocha (2009b) also concludes that "The interactivity of Web 2.0 or social software provides two-way communication and so lends itself to collaboration, co-operation and the development of a learning community." (p. 15).

Blackey and Chew (2009, as cited by Jones et al., 2010) have underlined the benefits of social software for higher education for students, academics and institutions in terms of enhancing learning and teaching experiences. According to these researchers, social networking enhances communication skills, widening participation, social engagement and collaboration, encourages peer-support and review, and creates learning interest for students through a community of learning. Moreover, since social networking sites are extremely widespread, they provide easy and free usage without much support from a University, they have the potential for students to create educational engagement and foster a sense of ownership when the learning process is published on the web, to retain access to their work, and furthermore to enable communication and learning history after they leave the University. Moreover, social networking sites are able to provide more personalized learning opportunities. Hargadon (2010) also suggests different benefits for all stakeholders. The researcher underlines the importance of (i) events that will possibly make an effect on educators, their students, and their institutions, (ii) continuous learning, (iii) accessing rich and mobile sets of professional development opportunities, (iv) donation with up-to-date information, and (v) addressing diverse needs for students suchas in terms of their learning styles.

These social networking technologies are also known as the "read/write web", since they provide meaningful ways to use and improve reading and writing skills. As stated in a report prepared by YALSA (2009), activities such as creating a profile on a social networking site, posting or commenting on a blog, writing about an idea on Twitter, and even searching for social content require both reading and writing skills. In the YALSA (2009) report, it is also mentioned that the use of social networking tools safely and smartly enables teens to meet their developmental requirements. For example, when students are able to use social networking tools in learning they show a commitment to learning, and when they have the opportunity to communicate with others via online social networking tools, they develop social and cultural competence. In addition, through these different activities they gain a sense of personal identity and value, as they are able to view positive role models.

Schroeder, Minocha and Schneider (2010) have explored a variety of implications regarding the introduction of social software into educational settings in their research study. They have concluded that "For fully exploiting the benefits that social software applications provide, there is a need to consider the risks and downsides which can mar the social software initiative or even cause legal implications for the hosting institution" (p. 169). Hence, the researchers presented their findings in form of a SWOT analysis. The researchers listed the strengths of social software as the building of social relationships, improved learning, enhanced communication between students and educators; weaknesses were identified as workload issues, limitations in the quality of interaction, and uncertainties of ownership and assessment. They listed opportunities as showcasing work to the public and creating and maintaining communities, whereas they listed threats as the inability to support and ensure the reliability of the applications, as well as the consequences of illegitimate use.

Furthermore, social networking sites are more flexible and user friendly than any learning management system in particular ways, namely that they stimulate more interesting ideas in teaching and assessment, they better meet an individual's need than services provided internally by the University, and they provide simpler steps to getting peers or other researchers to be involved in a research group or the same service for information and media sharing, and they provide opportunities for instant feedback. Moreover, social networking also has benefits for institutions such as enhancing blended learning experiences with all the above benefits, and improving students' inductions and retentions.

4. Method

Based on the notion that social networks can be a powerful and effective tool for instructors and students, this study was conducted to reveal students' perceptions about social networks from different perspectives. Hence, students thoughts on this topic were solicited via open-ended questions posed through an online survey which was announced via several social networks. Thus, the survey approach was used within this study in order to find answers to the following research questions.

- o   What are students' perceptions about socialization and indicators of socialization in social networks?
- o   Which tools do students prefer and for what purposes?
- o   What are students' preferences in terms of security and privacy issues?
- o   Which features of social networks do students like and dislike?
- o   What are students' perceptions about the benefits and obstacles of social networks?

Sample

A total of 71 students from the Faculty of Education formed the sample for this research study. Most of the students (47) were from the department of Computer Education and Instructional Technology. Other students were mainly members of the department of Mathematics Education. The online survey was announced on several social networks. Hence, contribution to the study was made on a voluntary basis.

Instrument - Social Networks' Usage Survey

Students were required to complete 16 open-ended questions (other than those regarding demographic information). For demographic information, details concerning the participants' sex, experience with social networks (~years), Faculty, Department, favourite social software or social network and finally e-mail addresses were requested. The open-ended questions were as follows:

1. According to you, what characteristics define knowledge acquisition and socialization in online environments?
2. Which tool or tools have you used up to now?
3. For which purposes did you chose the tool(s) you specified?
4. What were the tasks and activities you performed most with that tool(s)?
5. Do the social environments have limited users or open to public?
6. Were there any security issues with those tools? What were your preferences?
7. Were there any privacy issues about those tools? What were your preferences?
8. Which features of the tool do you like most?
9. Which features of the tool do you dislike most?
10. Which tool is your favourite? Please explain your reasons.
11. What do you think about the benefits of social networks?
12. What do you think about the obstacles of social networks?
13. Do you think that you know the potential dangers of using social networks?
14. According to you, what are the indicators of socialization in online environments?
15. According to you, what are the success indicators for socialization in social networks/online environments?

Data Analysis

The answers given to open-ended questions were analyzed through qualitative techniques. Emerging themes were formed as a result of the data was analysis. Then the themes were grouped under more general terms if appropriate. Additionally, some of the qualitative data was transformed into quantitative measures. At the end of the analysis, results were also reported by giving some original thoughts of the participants in the form of quotes.

5. Findings

Demographic Findings

Of the 71 participants, 41 were female whereas 30 were male. All of the students were from the Faculty of Education, but from different departments. Most of the students (47) were from the department of Computer Education and Instructional Technology. Other students were mainly members of the

department of Mathematics Education. The students' experience in social environments is presented in Figure-1.
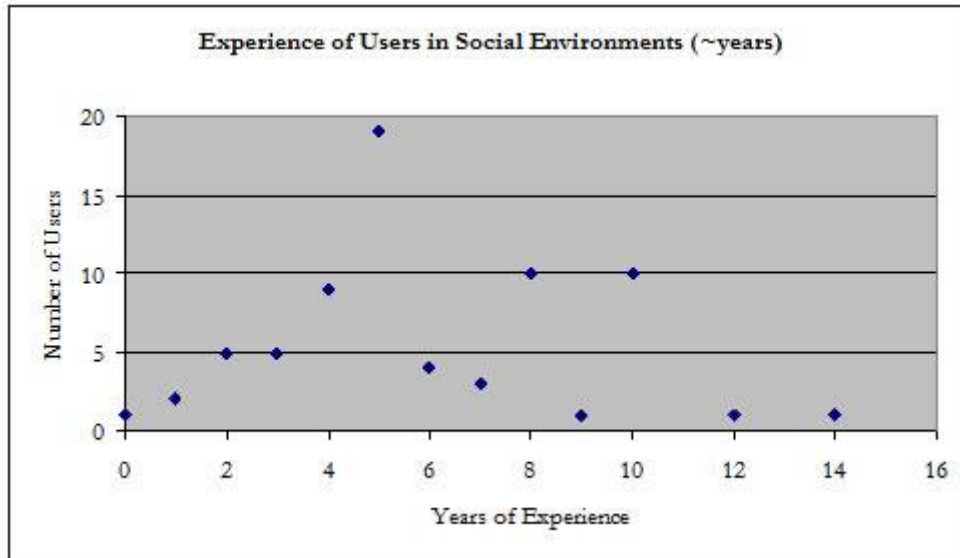

Figure 1 Experience of Users in Social Environments (~years)

Participants provided data about their favorite social software and social networks, such as Facebook (59 students). Their second preference was online chat tools (20 students). The other tools mentioned were Twitter, Google tools and Google docs, e-mail, blogs and similar tools.

Participants' Definition of Knowledge Acquisition and Socialization in Online Environments

Most of the participants (29) pointed out that the sharing of files, videos, materials and personal thoughts, as well as the increase in the flow of knowledge, as the characteristic features of knowledge acquisition and socialization in online environments. Online communication, interaction and dynamism was underlined as being key by 17 participants, while communication environments as chat and forum platforms for discussion were noted by 14 participants. Acquiring new friends (8), ease and speed of access (6) and independence from time and location (4) were also reported as other key characteristics. One of the participants gave definitions as "Knowledge acquisition can be defined by individuals' walls, status, activities and comments made toward these kinds of entities, whereas socialization can be defined as the areas of knowledge sharing for groups, games, comments and tags which also consist of knowledge acquisition".

Social Tools That the Participants Used, Purposes of Usage and the Tasks and Activities Carried Out Using That Tools

On a scale of most frequent to least frequent usage, the social software tools or social network tools that the participants reported using were Facebook, chat software, forums, Twitter, LMS, and Blogs. The reasons they use these tools are mainly for communication and interaction purposes (29 participants) and knowledge sharing, acquiring information and social sharing (20 participants). Other purposes of usage are for entertainment (9), for education (9), for socialization (7) and for spread usage (5).

Activities that the social environment users engage in indicate a great deal of diversity. The top three mentioned tasks are messaging and chat (15), the sharing of photos and videos (11) and online communication (10). The other tasks are sharing and gaining of knowledge, following daily news, watching videos, searching, find solutions to technical and real life problems, communication with old friends, research, personal sharing, entertainment and socialization. The social environments the largest proportion of students frequently participated in were open to the public (stated by 40 participants). Of the 71, 20 stated that they used social environments that have limited users, while 9 reported that they used both type of environments.

Thoughts on Security and Privacy Issues

The findings showed that participants do not have enough information about security issues. Of the 71 participants, 30 thought that there are enough precautions about security. Using a password, profile limitation and organizing personal information by putting preferred limitations provdied enough security (stated by 16 participants). Ten participants stated that the environment is secure enough, since personal information is shared only by friends, whereas four participants reported that they do not share personal information in these environments. Only 3 participants stated that the precautions were not enough, with other 3 participants saying that there were no precautions. More than half of the participants do not rely on these tools for sharing personal and private information. One of the participants consequently declared that "Security issues show changes according to the environment. Due to that reason, I only share information which cannot give harm to me when used by third parties." And another participant stated that "I do not trust issues towards security in Internet environment. Thus, I prefer to use a nickname".

In terms of the privacy issues, 42 participants affirmed the fact that individuals can control their personal information level of 'publicity' and in this way their private life can be protected by adequately organizing their profile information. Only 11 participants stated that there were no privacy issues, while 4 participants said that there were privacy issues but they were not adequate. One of the participants acknowledged that "I do not share my photos since [they] can make productions of them", with another participant noting that "if you do not organize privacy limits in your profile, there can be some threats towards your private life".

Thoughts on Most and Least Favored Features of the Tools

Participants declared a variety of features as being their favorites. These features from most mentioned to least are listed as follows:

- Social sharing, online/offline communication (20)
- Ease of use, usefulness (14)
- Speed of access to information and news (9)
- High interaction independent from location (9)
- Gaining knowledge while having fun (8)
- Keeping in touch with old friends (6)
- Adequate security and privacy issues (4)

One of the participants stated that "I am faced with many interesting topics that I cannot find or do not even know where to start searching" while another participant said that "I like learning new things while

also being entertained". Yet another noted, "I like "the wall" concept, a place where comments, news and information can be shared with all friends".

Although 7 participants reported that there are no features that they disliked, the thoughts of other participants revealed that the least favored features of social networks were mainly dependent on technology and the behaviors of other people.

- Being interrupted by many requests which are coming from unknown people (8)
- Not being in a secure environment (8)
- Inadequate privacy issues (7)
- The sharing of unnecessary knowledge (5)
- Being dependent on the Internet connection (5)
- Frequent and not useful changes in the user interface (5)
- The environments' being public (4)
- Limited personalization opportunities (2)
- Receiving too many mail messages (so that the inbox gets full) (2)
- Leading to an addiction (2)
- Inability to close your account (2)

One of the participants exclaimed that "On one occasion, Facebook had adjusted security issues in a way that meant profile pictures couldn't be seen by all people. These kinds of tasks, which are done without informing users, are not ethical".

Benefits and Obstacles of Social Networks

Concerning the possible benefits of social networks, 32 participants stated socialization and interaction as being the most important, whereas 22 participants pointed out the reinforcement of social links and communication. Another 22 participants underlined information sharing and the gaining of knowledge as the main benefit of social networks. One of the participants stated that "If used in parallel with its purpose, we learn a lot from shared materials. For example, there is a group named "learn three phrasal verbs a day", and [with this] we can learn three English words every day", while another said that "We are like in an information sea, the instructional dimension of social networks is so huge that you can have effect on a really wide community". Another participant affirmed the notion that "Social networks have increased communication between individuals and brought them closer to each other".

 On the other hand, when discussing the obstacles of social networks participants primarily focused on the privacy and security issue. The obstacles listed by the participants from most mentioned to least are as follows:

- The dissemination of personal information (17)
- The loss of time (13)
- The misuse of the environment for unethical purposes (9)
- The decrease in face-to-face interaction (8)
- The mistrust of communication (6)
- The leading into addiction (5)
- Information pollution (4)
- Security problems (3)

 Regarding the disadvantages, one participant declared that "I am afraid that in the future people will be socialized in social networks and dissocialized in their real lives".

While privacy and security seems to be a major problem for social network users, 37 of the participants declared that they know the potential dangers of using social networks. The rest of the participants either stated that they are aware of the potential dangers to some extent (18) or they do not know about the possible dangers of these environments (10). However, although 37 of the participants declared that they are aware of potential dangers, only two participants affirmed that they had read the privacy policy of the social network they use.

Indicators of Socialization in Online Environments

When the participants were asked about their thoughts on the indicators of socialization in online environments, information sharing, communication and interaction (24) and the increase in the number of friends (23) were the ones most frequently mentioned. Other indicators noted were the increase in time devoted to Internet usage (6), contribution to activities and groups (3), and becoming distant from real life (3).

From a positive point of view, one participant stated that "In short learning, if I can enhance my knowledge about different subject matters, this is socialization", while another said that "If you interact with the content you can said to be getting social. In the near future you can behave asocially in real life and socially in online environments, be careful". Yet another participant added that "Being online for a long time, and the negative effects of this situation on real life, should be considered as an indicator of socialization".

There were also a certain number of negative points of view on the topic. One participant suggested that "I don't think that people become social in social networks" while another said that "Socialization cannot be possible, because social networks can only be used for communication". Similarly, another participant said that whereas another declared "Being in front of a machine for a long time may bring dissocialization, this is an indicator of individualization".

Success Indicators for Socialization in Social Networks/Online Environments

With regard to the success indicators for socialization, six main themes emerged based on the answers of participants, as listed below.

- The sharing of ideas and effectiveness in online communication (14)
- The increase in information and sharing of knowledge (12)
- The number of comments and feedbacks returned to you (11)
- The increase in the number of friends (9)
- The effectiveness in face-to-face interaction (5)
- The increase in personal trust (4)

On this topic one participant noted that "I like receiving many positive and encouraging feedbacks which is also an indicator of my success in socialization". Often having similar thoughts to each other, another participant also said that "If I can communicate more easily in real life with my friends, this is a success indicator", whereas another added "If one can engage in real life activities communicating through social networks, this can be perceived a as sign of socialization".

6. Conclusion

The educational applications of social networks are growing rapidly, allowinging for iverse learning outcomes and activities in many different disciplines. While there is definitely a substantial quantity of action and effort being invested in the use of social networks, with a varying degree of quality, drawing conclusions at this stage as to practical ideas on "what works", "which audience", "which tools", and "how effective" is premature; more strategies for effective integration together with instructional design models should be sought. Hill, Song and West (2009) conducted a review and analysis of research related to social learning perspectives in web-based learning environments. The researchers underlined the importance of examining learners' characteristics, suggesting strategies for encouraging social interaction and developing effective design principles. Consequently, this research was conducted to shed light on the issues mentioned by the students in order to effectively design and integrate social technologies into education.

The findings indicated that the sharing of materials and personal thoughts, the increase in the flow of knowledge, and online communication and interaction were perceived by students as the characteristic features for knowledge acquisition and socialization in online environments. Parallel to this finding, the reason for using tools like Facebook, chat software, forum, Twitter, LMS, and Blogs was also mainly for communication and interaction purposes, knowledge sharing, gaining information and social sharing. Since communication and interaction were the most commonly mentioned issues, it was not surprising that the activities students most actively engaged in were messaging and chat, as well as the sharing of photos and videos. Hence, both gaining new knowledge and becoming more socialized can perceivably be achieved through the use of social environments. within connection with this finding, Yu, Tian, Vogel & Kwok (2010) have investigated the impacts of individual online social networking engagement from a pedagogical standpoint. The researchers have concluded that "Online social networking not only directly influences university students' learning outcomes, but also helps the students attain social acceptance from others and adapt to university culture, both of which play prominent roles in improving their learning outcomes" (p. 1494).

The results showed that social sharing, online and offline communication, ease of use and usefulness, quick access to information and news, and high interaction independent from location were the features most favored by students, whereas being interrupted by many requests coming from unknown people, not being in a secure environment and inadequate privacy issues were the issues that were disliked by participants. Furthermore, the findings showed that participants are not well informed about privacy and security issues, which leads to a high level of concern among students. This finding is also mentioned in other studies. For example, Minocha (2009a) conducted a case-study based investigation on social software tools and concluded that social software supports a variety of learning methods such as collaborative, problem-based, inquiry-based and reflective learning. Similar to the current study, the researcher also mentioned that "… students have concerns about usability, privacy and the public nature of social software tools for academic activities" (p. 245). Hence, they might have concerns because they are not well informed about these issues which also result in dislike.

Socialization and interaction, the reinforcement of social links and communication, alongside information sharing and the gaining of knowledge were listed as the main benefits of using social network sites. On the other hand, obstacles were again related with privacy and security issues. Other than the loss of time, dissemination of personal information and misuse of the environment for unethical purposes were the main obstacles reported by the participants.

Based on the findings of this study, information sharing, communication and interaction, as well as an increase in the number of friends, were revealed as the indicators of socialization in online environments. Hence, the success indicators for socialization were specified as the amount of shared knowledge, the effectiveness of communication and the number of activities and friends within the social environment.

It can be concluded that the new generation likes to communicate in social environments and that they also value the information they gain during this process. Thus, this environment should be considered as a learning environment in order to improve the quality in the communication process of our students. Hence, use of these environments should be integrated into the curriculum, especially for teacher education programs. As Pegrum (2009) states "It's important that teacher training programs show teachers how, from within the education system, they can introduce their students to – and model for them – the power of networks and networking technologies." (p. 102).

Having gained such attention, it can be concluded that social networks are currently shaping society and they will probably continue to shape more and more people incessantly. Besides these many facets, social networking technologies are offering considerable benefits for education also. Being able to benefit from the many opportunities of social networks is helping educators to address the many characteristics of active, creative, collaborative learning by supporting an online learning community, increasing student-student, student-content and teacher-student interaction, having students use argumentation, questioning and problem solving skills.

Lastly, it can also be concluded that this is just the beginning of a new era of global interconnectedness that will spread ideas and innovations around the world faster than ever before, by an increased number of digital literates, providing innovative opportunities for learning anytime and anywhere.

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