

## **Social Network's Role in the Classroom for Collaborative Learning**

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this study is to discuss the benefits and draw backs of the usage of social networks in the classroom environment. Can we use the social network as an enhancement learning tool to boost and motivate students to learn course work materials? Internet technology offers a number of possibilities and opportunities for enhancing the learning environment. Opportunities include providing a unique and dynamic environment for learning complex topics and render many difficult or boring subjects more interesting and perhaps easier to grasp. Educators noticed that students were using the social network media for sharing information and common interests. This communication tool provides a convenient means of communication and is an accepted method of exchanging information and interacting with others. As educators, a possible question is: can we take advantage of the social networks to engage the learner in absorbing course material or can we benefit from the social network as a communication media to reach out to our learners and use this media as a motivational tool?

**Keywords:** Social Network, Social Media, Collaborative Learning

### **Introduction**

In 2011, previous research by the primary author (Sanders) examined the relationship between social network technologies and students in an older generation. After concluding the initial research, it was shown that while social networking is highly effective in communicating with the younger generation, students of an older generation find it both challenging to utilize as well as a suspicious invasion of privacy. However, the findings from that study did show that both older and younger generations are supportive of social networking overall and that it is especially effective in communicating with those of the younger generation. As educators, the results from the initial study, as well as personal experience in the classroom, have inspired the current research to further explore the benefits and draw backs of the usage of social network technologies in the classroom environment. More specifically, this research will focus on the role of social networking technologies in collaborative learning.

## Review of the Literature

For the purpose of this paper, the term “social network” will refer to Facebook, MySpace, Google Plus, and LinkedIn. The term “messaging communications” will refer to other messaging systems including blogs, texting, Twitter, and others.

Bumgardner and Knestis (2011) have done research with high school students and their use of social networking platforms. They noted that “among students surveyed in a National School Boards Association study, 96 percent of those with online access reported using social networking, and half said they use it to discuss schoolwork” (Bumgardner, p. 85). Also suggested by this research, educational staff interested in utilizing social networking to enhance their courses should, as a practical matter, establish guidelines that lead to desired outcomes. Bumgardner and Knestis proposed the following sample guidelines (Bumgardner, p. 85):

1. Let your administrator, fellow teachers and parents know about your educational network.
2. When available, use school-supported networking tools.
3. Do not say or do anything that you would not say or do as a teacher in a classroom. (Remember that all online communications are stored and can be monitored.)
4. Have a clear statement of purpose and outcomes for the use of the networking tool.
5. Establish a code of conduct for all network participants.
6. Do not post images that include students without parental release forms on file.
7. Pay close attention to the site’s security settings and allow only approved participants access to the site.

A second study done by Russo, Watkins, and Groundwater-Smith (2009) investigated informal learning environments created by museums, libraries and galleries to enable young people to connect with cultural content. The study revealed that:

“There is an innovative and effective role for social media to play in creating authentic learning experiences based on social networking and informal knowledge sharing. By acting as trusted online cultural networks, informal learning environments such as museums can extend their pedagogical practices to engage young people in knowledge sharing around cultural collections.” (Russo, p. 164)

This same study by Russo, Watkins, and Groundwater-Smith (2009), suggested that these aforementioned institutions of cultural and educational learning should work together to engage the younger generation in storytelling via social mediums. Furthermore, they suggest that there should be an emphasis on subjects that have the ability to evolve and form new knowledge as a result of the collaboration. Lastly, the research goes on to proffer that connecting with youth through social learning sites could encourage a connection between a younger culture and more traditional learning

environments such as museums, libraries and galleries. Therefore, these two studies seem to suggest that the social network can be an effective tool to enhance learning and indeed some students are already employing it for this purpose.

Finally, Green and Hannon (2011), suggested in their research that technology should be approached from the student's perspective, include content created from their viewpoints, and use creative online space technology to share and provide information. Restated, in order to most effectively connect with and educate the younger generation, one must communicate, collaborate, and share knowledge with them from their point of view and utilize their preferred technology.

## **Research Method**

The data for this study was collected in a series of open interviews and survey questionnaires. Open interviews were conducted with college professors in small group settings of four to eight. These professors taught a wide variety of subjects including computer science, business management, and general education. The participants for the open interviews were selected based on the convenience of the research time frame, participant availability, and willingness for interviews. Participants were asked to respond to the following questions regarding social networks:

- Can we, as educators, use the social network as a learning tool to teach complex and/or boring subjects or to simply motivate students to complete their homework assignments?
- Can we, as educators, benefit from the social network as a communication media to reach out to our learners and engage the learner or motivate the learner?
- Can we, as educators, benefit from the social network when asking students to work in teams to complete project assignments or individual homework assignments? If so, what type of assignment would you suggest?

Additionally, survey questionnaires were sent to currently enrolled college students. They were asked to indicate whether they participated in social network media and if so, to indicate which network and the primary reason for use. Furthermore, they were to state if they participated in messaging communications and if affirmative, which system, and primary reason for use. If they were not utilizing either social network media or messaging communications, they were asked to indicate the reason for declining participation in either medium. The participants in the survey questionnaires were selected from widely disparate disciplines throughout the student body. To create meaningful data, both undergraduate and graduate students were included.

## **Data Analysis Discussion and Finding**

### *Student Surveys: Participants*

In total, 239 students were invited to participate with 173 responding. The remaining students opted out due to lack of desire to participate or failure to return the survey. Of the 173 students that responded and participated in the survey questionnaire, 90% were undergraduate students and 10% were graduate students. The sample included students from diverse major areas of study and a variety of classification levels. The age of respondents varied from 17 years of age to over 51 years of age with the following breakdown: 60% were between the ages of 18 to 30, 21% between the ages of 31 to 40, 10% were aged 41 to 50, and 8% were 51 years of age or older. Moreover, 47% of respondents were male and 53% were female.

The data analysis results of the student surveys highlighted several issues. First, the results revealed that 77% of the participants were already involved in some form of social networking as a communications tool. The most commonly reported sites were Facebook (75%), LinkedIn (12%), and Google Plus (8%). Among those already engaged in social network media, 35% stated that they use the social network primarily for school related activities while 38% selected business/job related activities as the primary reason for use. However, regardless of their primary motivation, 93% of the students using the social network reported that they simply enjoyed participating and staying in touch.

In addition, 76% of respondents were also regularly engaging in some type of messaging or communication system such as Twitter, blogging, or simple texting. The most commonly reported messaging systems were simple texting (75%) and Twitter (17%). These communication methods allowed students to complete school related activities, research, and/or business activities as well. Among those already engaged in messaging communications, 55% stated that they used them for school related activities and 62% indicated also using messaging communications for business/job related functions. Additionally, 67% stated that they used messaging for emergency communications as well with 92% of the subset already utilizing messaging systems reporting that they simply enjoyed messaging to stay in touch.

### *Professor Interviews*

During the professor interviews, the educators were asked if they could benefit from using the social network in their classes. Unanimously, the respondents agreed that they did feel social networking could make positive contributions to their courses. These perceived benefits included distributing information, divulging additional resources, improving the quality and frequency of communication amongst both students and the instructor, and engaging the learner. As a consequence, the potential to improve student involvement and knowledge also exists and thus the potential to improve student learning and their resulting grades. The professors did qualify their support by asserting that the sites must be properly overseen by the professor to maintain integrity, information accuracy, and focus among the groups. They also concurred that social networking possesses the ability to motivate learners. However, despite the perceived benefits, 77% of the educators interviewed have not actually included social networking in their courses. Therefore, only 23% of the professors were currently employing social networking sites in their courses.

We will examine the professors who opted not to utilize social networking media first. A majority of these educators were willing to include the social network in their teaching material but were leery of this option for a number of reasons. Although not strictly prohibited or required by their institutions, they reported high levels of intimidation on how to effectively navigate and utilize the medium due to lack of familiarity. Additionally, they were unsure as to which subjects, class structure, and assignments would derive the largest benefit. However, most of them concurred that educators could exploit this new communication trend to their advantage and effectively reach out and engage their learners.

Of the 23% of professors that utilized the social networking sites, two-thirds were forced to use them based upon restrictions placed on communication between students in different classes by the university platform. However, after using them, they were pleasantly surprised with the results and decided to further examine their use. For instance, two of the professors revealed that they had used the social network in three different semesters to facilitate student involvement for team projects. These two professors both taught classes in different subjects for different majors that culminated in a combined Senior Project. They wanted to combine both business and computer science students for a complimentary learning project to expose them to material outside their designated major and widen their knowledge base. However, the class shell prevented students registered under one professor in one course from communicating with students registered under the other professor in the other course. For that reason, the professor and students opted to utilize social networking sites outside of the classroom to collaborate and communicate with each other and complete the team project component of the class. During these three semesters, the primary media chosen were FaceBook and Google Plus. Interestingly, the student teams that chose to coordinate the project with outside networking sources experienced several positive outcomes compared to the teams that avoided social network sites. Overall, they reported more cohesive teamwork, higher quantities of data exchanged, and an increased frequency of student participation and engagement. At the completion of the project, they rated their teammates higher in both communication and timely submission of their respective portions of the assignment. Additionally, the teams utilizing social network media earned higher overall scores on the project, issued fewer complaints about their team members, and met all of their self-imposed intermediate deadlines. In contrast, the teams that chose to restrict communication to the medium provided in the course shell reported an increased lack of teammates' presence, issued more complaints regarding their teammates' participation, and experienced higher levels of disagreement and discord amongst the group.

In a separate experience, a professor of computer science revealed that she routinely used social networking for class discussions and to address general questions regarding class work. Since she implemented this process, several outcomes showed significant improvement. In general, the students reported and demonstrated an increased comfort level with asking questions, checked in with the instructor more frequently, and engaged in more meaningful communication with their classmates. Consequently, the students also improved their content mastery as well as their grades.

## **Limitations and Validity**

Like most research, data gathered for this study possessed constraints that could affect the results and skew the research conclusions. For example, the survey questionnaires were given to particular classes at one medium-sized college and one small-sized university with participants based on convenience. Also, open interviews with professors were conducted with a small sample size limited by the research time frame, sample subject availability, and willingness for interview. Furthermore, while the faculty sample did include professors in a wide variety of fields, certain subject matters and course structures were not appropriate for this research. For example, instructors teaching courses that require little to no research or collaboration among students would obviously derive decreased benefit from the usage of social networking.

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to discuss the benefits and draw backs of the usage of the social network to boost student involvement and motivate students to learn course work materials. There are many social networking sites including Facebook, MySpace, and Google Plus. Also included also are techniques such as simple text messaging and communication systems such as Twitter and blogging. This research has revealed that social networking is highly popular and is well accepted as a way of communicating among the younger generation. In addition, research has shown that texting is, at the present, the most desirable media for staying in touch.

In summary, the study revealed that there are potential advantages to employing social networking media in the classroom to teach course material. Furthermore, it was suggested that students who utilize social networking sources for assistance with completing their assignments also experienced higher overall satisfaction with their educational experience. Although it seems crucial to use the latest technology to enhance the classroom learning environment, it is not necessary to use any social network sites unless students indicate an interest in using it to learn course content or to increase collaboration among classmates for group assignments. To optimize use of this valuable tool, this study recommends further training for educators to familiarize themselves with various social networks and examine their options for implementing social networking as a course enhancement learning tool.

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