Chapter 29

Social Networking for Educational Purposes:
The Development of Social-Cultural Skills through Special Interest Groups

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines and evaluates the role, usefulness, and value of social networking as perceived by higher education students. It examines the educational role of social networking by developing Special Interest Groups (SIGs) within a social networking site (Facebook). It also tries to examine the development of socio-cultural skills through the SIGs created within the social networking site. Specifically, this chapter describes and presents an evaluation of the use of three Facebook SIGs by faculty and students of five Universities in Cyprus in three discipline areas: 1) MIS – Management Information Systems; 2) Computer Science; and 3) Engineering. A mixed method approach was employed, collecting quantitative data (through questionnaires) and qualitative data (through focus groups and Facebook SIGs' observations). The results highlight the promising and important role as well as the value of such online groups in both social and academic life. Additionally, the development of socio-cultural skills through the use of Facebook and specifically the SIGs is discussed. Finally, the chapter discusses the "best practice" policies for Facebook integration for educational purposes.

INTRODUCTION

Projects and services of the Web 2.0 family are an important part of our daily life activities, with social networking sites registering millions of people and enabling information and resources sharing, communication, and collaboration (Eteokleous & Ktoridou 2011). Students are greatly immersed in Web 2.0 technologies such as social networking sites, blogs, wikis, twitter, podcasts, virtual worlds, video and photo sharing with the Internet playing a major role in students'

social, but also academic lives. Educators turn to Web 2.0 tools, drawing upon these tools' ability to assist in creating, collaborating and sharing content, but most importantly using their ability to offer students the advanced technology they really need for educational, professional and personal purposes. Numerous research studies have begun to examine social networking sites; however, few of them have specifically addressed the role of Web 2.0 technologies in pedagogy (Charnigo & Barnett-Ellis, 2007; Hewitt & Forte, 2006; Mathews, 2006; Mazer, Murphy & Simonds, 2007; Selwyn, 2007; Towner & VanHorn, 2007). It is generally accepted that students need to develop a combination of skills, including higher order thinking skills, and social, cultural, leadership, and management skills, to address successfully the demands of the high-tech, multicultural society in the globalized and interconnected world we live in today (Eteokleous, 2011). Technology, and particularly Web 2.0, has the ability to bring students having different characteristics (gender, educational background, nationality, etc) together and teach them how to work and collaborate together in an online setting. The research findings discussed in this chapter highlights the value of employing social networking sites for educational purposes and their role in developing various skills and most importantly socio-cultural skills.

Purpose

The present chapter examines and evaluates the role, usefulness and value of social networking as perceived by higher education students. Specifically, the research examines the educational role of social networking by developing and evaluating Special Interest Groups that operate in a social networking site (in this case Facebook). The research also aims to identify the role of social networking sites in developing socio-cultural skills through the Special Interests Groups created. Specifically, this chapter describes and presents an evaluation of the use of three Facebook Interest Groups by faculty and students of five Universities in three discipline areas: 1) MIS – Management Information Systems, 2) Computer Science and 3) Engineering.

BACKGROUND

Web 1.0 and 2.0

The term Web 1.0 characterizes the state of the Web (World Wide Web) since its emergence in 1991 until 2001, when new developments and trends in technologies led to the upgrading of its use in many different ways. Web 1.0 consisted of websites that simply served static content and gradually passed through the continuous improvement of web browsers and multimedia technology that supports more interactive functions and dynamic content (O'Reilly, 2005). In Web 1.0, users were passive "consumers" of information and characterized as "the public" without having any contribution or active involvement. Web 1.0 users were reading, receiving and researching (the 3 Rs) (Hardagon, 2009). Web 1.0 began with searching for information in books, news, music and whatever else could be handled in digital form. These web uses still exist, since there is a continuous emergence of new data, which is made directly accessible in electronic form. The technological advancement in information technology and telecommunications resulted in the development of Web 2.0 and created the appropriate framework for user participation. However, despite significant differences on a technical level, the substantial difference between Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 lies in the roles of the user (O'Reilly, 2005). The transition to Web 2.0 is characterized as a change in the role of the user from ''consumer'' to ''participant'' and ''co-producer''.

With the advent of Web 2.0, the Internet has become truly interactive. Specifically, a site's primary content is developed by its users, and the more traditional one-way communication of

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