Chapter 14

Social Networks:
Implications for Education

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ABSTRACT

Online social networks (SNs) are dynamic Web 2.0 applications that can be used for teaching, learning, and research activities. These SNs offer a myriad of collaborative features for generating content and fostering interactive communication. Although many K-16 administrators tend to focus on the negative consequences of using such applications, online social networks, if managed effectively as instructional tools, can provide opportunities for educators to help students develop 21st century skills. This discussion provides an overview how online social networks can be used in education and offers guidelines for implementation.

UNDERSTANDING SOCIAL NETWORK SITES

The ever-increasing mainstream use of social networks no doubt has had an impact on our information culture. Social network sites have nearly replaced email as the primary mode of communication exchange on the Internet because they offer a rich array of free multimodal features that enable users to share music, photos, videos, and files in a seamless manner. As a result, it is no wonder why our students spend more time on social network sites than on any other web sites on the Internet. Yet despite this reality, many administrators and educators are still reluctant to transition these technologies into the classroom.

Since most social network users are under the age of 35, these platforms are seen as cyberspace "hang outs" for young people (NSBA par 3). As a result, it is often difficult to consider social networks as platforms for education. In turn, administrators and educators have raised many questions on how and if social networks can support learning. Eberhardt (2007) summarizes some of the primary concerns:

1. How significantly do social networks affect student learning?
2. How do social networks create challenges for students' intellectual development?
3. How does or can this behavior help students develop the identify they need to effectively address complex questions, take a stand based on their beliefs, and negotiate meaning with others?

The lack of research on this subject often reaffirms the negative assessment that social network sites should be left out of the classroom. Critics, who believe that the medium cannot substitute for environments that foster structured formal learning, argue that the knowledge attained through social networks is superficial at best. Yet, research shows us that informal learning is often just as beneficial to our students. If given the opportunity to interact with teachers and other experts in an open environment, students are more likely to participate in the learning. Students gain what is often referred to as a "collective intelligence" or "wisdom of crowds" which results from the learning community that develops in an educational social network environment. In fact, the 2007 Horizon Report suggests "the features that make these tools so compelling are features that we need to understand and incorporate into higher education (for) to harness the power of social networking (is) to build rich, interactive, (and) robust learning communities." (45)

BACKGROUND OF SOCIAL NETWORKS

Social network sites that emerged in the late 1990's are online communities that enable individuals to communicate, collaborate, and share content. Unlike newsgroup and listserv platforms, social network applications are much more dynamic because they offer a wide range of "read-write" features to allow users to generate and interact with the content. When an individual obtains an account through a social networking application, he or she is asked to create an online profile. A profile may consist of a simple format page or a series of pages that can contain a wide range of information related to the individual's educational background, work experience, and interest areas. Depending upon the social networking application, the individual can then modify and customize the profile and build additional pages within the application to create a personalized web space that includes photos, videos, and even music. The user can also enhance the page by adding a wide range of interactive applications such as RSS news feeds or micro-applications such as widgets.

Once the profile is established, the individual can seek out other users in the larger network of the application to create an inner circle of contacts or "friends." Individuals build their network by inviting or "friending" others to link to their page. As an individual links to other profiles, a social network emerges. This inner circle of individuals will then have access to each other's profile spaces to share information and communicate with each other directly. Although individuals usually link to people they know from a specific social network (education, work or shared cause), there are many instances in which people establish connections with individuals they have never met. Boyd & Ellison (2007) note that "participants are not necessarily "networking" or looking to meet new people; instead they are primarily communicating with people who are already a part of their extended social network". As a result, it is very easy for people to have a network of "friends" they will never meet face to face.

There are many different types of social networking applications, but all share the same basic structures. The profile page is usually built upon an existing template that enables the user to modify the profile design by changing the layout or features of the main page. All social network applications provide the ability to set up privacy parameters that determine how access to informa-

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