Chapter 5

Ethical Tensions Emerging from the Application of the Collective Intelligence Concept in Academic Social Networking

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the ethical questions and actions emerging from academic social networking. Academics have always been involved in rigorous discourse across multiple contexts, involving generation, exploration, analysis, evaluation, and application of ideas through a process of thought, research, peer validation, and publication. The argument is that the concept of collective intelligence is changing the traditional hierarchical "rules" associated with academic dialogue. Collective intelligence is defined as a mix of formal and informal conversational contexts, and the storing and sharing of ideas and information through multiple public online contexts. The meta-concept of collective intelligence presents a number of ethical dilemmas and questions related to privacy, and ownership and control of net-generated data, ideas, and information. The purpose of this chapter is to identify and describe these ethical issues and actions in relation to academic social networking.

INTRODUCTION

Academics have always been involved in rigorous discourse across multiple contexts including conferences, teaching, academic writing, and research. Having a sense of curiosity about ideas, asking clarifying questions as part of a critiquing process and seeking congruence when dealing with different perspectives about complex problems; these are conventional aspects of a fertile academic life.

The emergence of Web 2.0, and in particular the social networking phenomenon have impacted significantly on who, how, when, where and why academics can engage in learning conversations. Networking for knowledge generation is not confined to academics because the social imperative to exchange in this form of exchange, although originally academic, now comes from the broader commercial and government community. Web 2.0 has emerged as a creative driver of "reworking hierarchies, changing social divisions, creating possibilities and opportunities, informing us, and reconfiguring our relations with objects, spaces, and each other" (Beer & Burrows, 2007, p. 2). Social networking technologies have introduced permeable, public, and participatory elements to academic conversations that are disruptive and invigorating.

Here, academic social networking is conceptualized as extending traditional formal academic scholarship into a blend of ordered and informal social practices characterized by collaboration, sharing, and conversation that values openness and deliberate seeking of outside perspectives and difference. This is consistent with the views of Greenhow, Robelia, and Hughes (2009, p. 253), who argue that participation in social networking by academics "Capitalizes on the learning ecology perspective, bridging scholarship and advocacy well beyond traditional, formal university spaces."

Examples of academic engagement in social networking spaces include formal and informal learning management spaces; attending virtual conferences; writing, editing, rating, and commenting on digital material including journal papers and texts; participation in online special interest groups; use of blogs and wikis; online forums; collaborative writing; Facebooking with students and colleagues; sharing multi-media; contributing to and linking with databases e.g. iTunesU; e-portfolios and individual Web pages.

Features of social networking that act as a framework for this chapter are interconnection, content creation, and interactivity (based on Greenhow, et al., 2009). Web 2.0 tools allow interconnection limited only by an individual's technical and Internet access capability; afford content creation through access to ideas, information and data; and through interaction with either information or others, share, remix, edit, create, or reframe knowledge.

Three broad sociological issues are apparent when considering the impact of social networking on academic knowledge generation (See for example Beer & Burrows, 2007). In a sense these issues have always existed regardless of the nature of exchange but the key difference now is these communities of learners are no longer entirely exclusive as they were in the past. First, when an academic posts a blog entry, edits a wiki, or tweets; they are both producing and consuming ideas and information, more so as others interact with these postings. This generates ethical issues around the role of the individual as part of the process of active knowledge production. Second, information that may have been relatively private through the exchange of personal correspondence or even a handwritten journal is now frequently publicly available. For instance, interaction on a blog produces a range of information in addition to the actual content—number of visitors, frequency of visits and postings, key words used in postings, and so on. Popular topics and interest groups can readily be identified by commercial data trawlers or e-researchers. Ethical issues here related to privacy and use of data by third parties, and questions about consent and identity become important. One ethical question concerns the possible vulnerability of individuals who may be unaware of the public status of using Web 2.0 technology. Finally, the public nature of online social networking has lead to a discourse of democratization of knowledge. This has led to ethical concerns about respect for diverse opinions and cultural representation and positioning.

The purpose of this conceptual paper is to identify and describe ethical issues, questions, and actions that have practical and functional applica-

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