

Chapter 13

Benefits and Risks of Social Networking Sites: Should they also be Used to Harness Communication in a College or University Setting?

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ABSTRACT

One of the challenges facing university and college professors is the use of effective and efficient communication with their students. One solution could be the use of social networking sites to engage students and the U.S. 2010 Digital Year in Review (2011), social networking continues to grow as one of the web's top activities with 9 out of every 10 U.S. Internet users accessing break down communication barriers, according to a social networking site every month. The study includes an in-depth review of the uses, benefits and risks of social networking sites as well as how they might be utilized in a college or university setting. The researcher in this study surveyed university business students at a private, four-year, Hispanic-serving institution in Texas about their use of social networking sites and how professors might integrate these sites into the curriculum.

INTRODUCTION

Being electronically connected to most everything – friends, family, news, entertainment, and music, just to name a few -- is the norm for the college and university student of today. Students face a

barrage of new technologies on a regular basis, and they are becoming quite adept at adapting to these technologies. Technology has become an integral part of our lives, and one way that many students stay connected is through the use of social networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, LinkedIn, etc. And now, not only are

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students staying connected with the computers, they are using iPads and smartphones as well.

Research indicates that the use of social networking sites has been increasing for all age groups over the last five years. According to the Pew Internet and American Life Project Surveys (2006, 2010), the amount of time Americans spent on social networking sites in 2006 was 9% compared to 38% in 2010. For the 18-29 age group, time spent on social networking sites increased from 31% in 2006 to 60% in 2010. The use for 30 to 49 year-old Americans increased from 4% in 2006 to 39% in 2010. From June 2009 to June 2010, time spent on social networking sites increased from 16% to 23% respectively (Womack, 2010). It is evident that social networking is changing how people communicate.

The use of social networking sites has expanded to include not simply social aspects of our lives, but now these sites are being utilized by job seekers, employers, hiring managers, and educational personnel. However, issues such as privacy and security have become major concerns for social networking site users. Controversies over what is acceptable and appropriate have caused law suits and employment issues. New policies are being implemented by employers to protect themselves against negative information on their employees' social networking sites. Scam artists have moved from emails to social networking sites to try to cheat people. Controversy also abounds as to whether or not the use of social networking sites for educational purposes serves a legitimate purpose or if it simply disengages the learners from the educators. Should these sites remain "social" sites or can a gap be bridged to make them useful when implementing university and college curricula? The capability to make them educationally useful is already present, but capability, in and of itself, does not make it valuable, and it may not benefit the students.

The purpose of this research was to investigate different types of social networking sites, how they are currently being used, their benefits, their risks,

and how university and college professors might utilize them to bridge the communication gap with their students. The research concludes with a study that was conducted to determine how students at a four-year Hispanic serving institution in Texas utilize social networking sites and how they felt these sites could be utilized by their professors in the students' coursework. Students provided demographic data regarding age, ethnicity, gender, and classification (freshman, sophomore, junior, or senior). Statistical analyses were then performed to determine if there were any statistical relationships between variables.

Types of Social Networking Services

The term "social network site" can be defined as a web-based service that allows users to construct a profile, create a list of users with whom they share a connection, and view the information of their connections (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Once a member of a site, users can specify their "friends", "contacts", or "fans." Once the connections are established, those within the group can view each other's information that has been provided in the profiles.

For the purpose of this research, four types of social networking services will be reviewed: 1) profile-based, 2) content-based, 3) mobile, and 4) work-based. Profile-based social networking services are largely centered around members' profile pages that contain information about the member such as likes, dislikes, and interests (Childnet International, 2008). Some of the most common profile-based services include Facebook, MySpace, and Bebo. All three of these sites are on the top ten list of the most popular social networking sites (Strickland, 2011; Geeks Desk, 2011). Facebook is the number one site with over 750 million users; Bebo has over 117 million users, and MySpace boasts more than 100 million users (Bennett, 2011).

With content-based social networking services the focus is on the posting of content as opposed

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