

## Chapter 34

# Creating Ongoing Online Support Communities through Social Networks to Promote Professional Learning

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### ABSTRACT

*Professionals who want to remain competitive in their fields are turning to Web 2.0 to learn the knowledge and skills they need in order to do their work more efficiently and effectively. Through a detailed description of how one instructor transformed his online graduate courses into dynamic, interactive, ongoing online learning communities that extended beyond the classroom, this chapter provides academics and practitioners a model for establishing a professional network that learners can participate in, and replicate in their workplaces for their professional development and informal learning. An overview of the role of social networking in creating professional development and informal learning opportunities for cognitive apprenticeship, knowledge brokering, and ongoing online support communities, as well as the results of a survey conducted on students' perceptions of the impact of the social networking strategies and tools on their professional development and informal learning in and out of class will also be discussed.*

### INTRODUCTION

More than ever before, professionals are being required to keep up with fast-paced changes in technology, information, and ways of doing their jobs. While formal training and higher education

programs have traditionally been the primary source of formal learning and professional development, research (Halx, 2010; Nair & Webster, 2010; McKinsey Global Institute, 2011) revealed that many of these programs, even those delivered online, employ traditional instructor-led content-centered strategies, such as lectures, isolated hands-on activities, and reading of texts, while

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in the workplace, professionals are required to learn in new ways and direct their own learning. To address this disparity, one professor turned to social media to create a virtual learning network, where his students could connect with a group of like-minded professionals. Over the past two years, this virtual learning network has grown to include over 120 students and alumni. Through tools like social networking sites, blogs and wikis, faculty, students, and alumni share their knowledge and experiences, successes and challenges, and views on events impacting their profession. When students need program advice, assistance with a technical issue or a course-related assignment, or help in addressing an issue at work, they turn to this cohort for assistance. An informal, professional learning network has naturally developed from the active and sustained participation of current students, faculty, and alumni, who are professionals in their fields.

This chapter presents a model for academics and practitioners through a case study that describes how one instructor transformed his online graduate courses into dynamic, interactive, ongoing online support communities that extended beyond the limitations of the courseware-managed classroom. Using tools like social networking sites, blogs, and wikis, current and former students interact with each other to build professional relationships, share ideas, and seek answers to challenges they faced at school and at work. A survey of the students' perceptions of the impact of social networking, revealed that having discovered the value of the social networks, they applied the knowledge and skills they acquired in these online graduate courses by setting up social networking sites to promote professional and informal learning opportunities in their own workplaces. An overview of the role of social networking in creating ongoing online support communities that support cognitive apprenticeship and knowledge brokering for sustained professional development and informal learning, as well as the results of

a survey conducted on students' perceptions of the use of social media and its impact on their professional development and informal learning on-the-job are also discussed.

## **BACKGROUND**

Until recently, the term professional development typically described formal learning and training activities, usually provided by experts to train professionals in the knowledge and skills they required to carry out their jobs. Fast-paced changes in Internet and mobile technologies have changed professional development by putting the tools for the creation, selection, and sharing of learning into the hands of the end users. Stevens (2006) noted that in addition to basic learning resources available online, Web 2.0 has changed the landscape for professional development by providing tools not available in previous versions of the Web. For example, accompanying Web 2.0 is a host of communication services, commonly known as social networking tools or social media. "Web 2.0 is where anyone can not only take information down from it but also create content and upload to it. In this respect the Web is not simply a one-way means of obtaining knowledge, but also a place where you interact with the material and annotate and contribute to the content" (p. 3). Through the use of social media such as Facebook®, Twitter®, LinkedIn®, MySpace®, and others, users stay connected, oftentimes in real-time, and become active creators, not just recipients of content and information.

The changes in the technological landscape have prompted changes in learning for professionals.

As a result, researchers such as Bitter-Rijkema and Verjans (2010), differentiate between *professional development*- information that is presented to employees by those with expertise in the area, and *professional learning*- "learning activities

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