

# Understanding the Potentials of Social Media in Collaborative Learning

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## INTRODUCTION

Social media is a potential technology to support collaborative learning practices. This chapter illustrates the potential benefits of using social media in collaborative learning. To explain the potentials of social media, the first part of the chapter discusses the nature of the social media technologies and web 2.0. The second part illustrates the idea and importance of collaborative learning to address the changing demands of the 21st century. After introducing the fundamental concepts and ideas related to social media in first two parts, final section discusses the potentials of social media in collaborative learning following with a discussion section and a summary in the conclusion section.

## BACKGROUND

Web 2.0 and related developments enabled the growth of social media concept. Web 2.0 provides both technical and philosophical bases that empower the underlying properties of social media. Web 2.0 created a new opportunity for the end users to feel related to the other users and/or institutions who are the creator, co-creator or shareholder of the content. The latest development in the Web 2.0 technology offered a platform that allows internet users to create and share many audio-visual knowledge artifacts (Yengin, 2014 a). Especially, the user owned content creation

and sharing qualities makes Web 2.0 empowered social media services as a potential platform for collaborative learning, in which the working together and co-creation of knowledge is essential.

The idea of using social media for learning is widely discussed in the literature (see following sections). Since there is a literature already discussing the social media in learning in general, this chapter aims for turning our attention to a more specific discussion on the potentials social media brings for collaborative learning activities. Hence, to analyze the issue with a comprehensive understanding, this chapter discuss the underlying mechanisms of Web 2.0 that empower the social media concept, definitions of social media with examples and list of social media services, dynamics and importance of collaborative learning in modern education and connections between collaborative learning and social media.

## SOCIAL MEDIA

Before starting to talk about social media, it should be defined with a clear distinction from the interchangeably used terms such as “social networking”. Social networking is defined in Meriem-Webster dictionary as “forms of electronic communication (as websites for social networking and microblogging) through which users creates online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content (as videos)”. The same dictionary defines the social media as “a

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creation and maintenance of personal and business relationships especially online”.

Several authors defined “social networking” as a venue for users to share their activities and interests with others in a particular community (Fenton, 2012). Social networking allows users to have an online profile in a bounded system to connect with other users to communicate and collaborate (Boyd & Ellison, 2007).

Different authors defined “social media” as a way of creative expression (Gauntlett, & Thomsen, 2013; Zagalo & Branco, 2015), exchanging user-generated content (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010), spreading and sharing meaningful and valuable content (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013) in a culture of collaboration and connectivity (Dijck, 2013) using web technologies such as web 2.0 (Power 2007 ;Tuten 2008 & Brown 2009).

Although dictionaries and different authors make an attempt to define the “social networking” and “social media” to show that these are not exactly same terms, people often use the term of “social networking” and “social media” interchangeably (Cohn, n.d.). This confusion could be a result of the lack of clear cut between social media and social networking concepts. To approach this issue of providing a clear and definite definition of “social networking” and “social media”, this part will provide literature about the common and different properties of these terms and provide a short and practical definition.

The basic commonalities of “social networking” and “social media” are that they both rely on the internet as a communication channel. Another common property between two is allowing people to interact in social ways. The online social interaction or online sociality is defined as “collective action, communication, building communities, connecting and networking, creative content making, collaborative knowledge building, sharing, playing etc.” by Fuchs (2013).

Comparing social media and social networking terms, the main difference is that social media allows publication of knowledge. The two main distinctive characteristics of social media are en-

abling the participation and power of publishing (Hanna, Rohm & Crittenden, 2011). While social media is related to user-generated publishing and distribution of the content knowledge, social networking creates the necessary basis and a technical framework for the social media to live on.

Interestingly, a social networking service may change its characteristics within time and transform to a social media platform. For example, a study (Kwak et al., 2010) showed that users’ way of using social networking tool may re-define it as a social media platform. In their study, researchers crawled 41.7 million user profiles, 1.47 billion social relations, 4, 262 trending topics, and 106 million tweets to analyze the topological characteristics of Twitter, which is an online social networking service allowing users to follow and being followed on published content (Kwak et al., 2010). According to the results of this study, Twitter had become a social media platform even though it had started as a social networking service.

As seen with the examples, sometimes the precise categorization of the technologies and services as social media or social networking platforms may be impractical since the terms are used changeable by many people and the services may transform to a different nature in time. For practical reasons of avoiding confusions, the definitions would be that the “social media” as the services that allow users to generate and share content online and the “social networking” as the services that allow to managing the relationships in online social communities.

In addition to the definitions, seeing the examples of social media services may be more helpful for readers to better understand the social media services. Using website traffic data from different sources, eBizMBA Rank website (2016) published the following list in Table 1, showing the most popular 15 social media and social networking services as of Feb 2016.

These social media services can be categorized in two formats: “users’ profiles based” and “content-based services” (Kamila & Bhattacharjee, 2014). User profile based services focus on

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