

Chapter 27

University 2.0: Embracing Social Networking to Better Engage the Facebook– Generation in University Life

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ABSTRACT

The social networking Web site is one type of Web 2.0 innovation that has been embraced by university-aged young people. The success of Facebook and similar Web sites has prompted universities to explore how they might use social networking Web sites to engage with their students. In this chapter, I argue that universities are misguided in their attempts to use social networking groups to attempt to engage with students registered with the Web sites. I present empirical evidence from a case study university to substantiate this claim. A framework is developed to categorise the university-related Facebook groups and competing theoretical perspectives on diffusion of innovation are employed to analyse the participation in these groups by students. Recommendations are made for universities, and other organisations, intending to use social networking Web sites to engage with students.

INTRODUCTION

“Others now question whether the idea of a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) ... makes sense in the Web 2.0 world. One Humanities lecturer is reported as having said: “I found all my students were looking at the material in the VLE but going straight to Facebook to use the discussion tools and discuss the material and the lectures. I thought I might as well join them and ask them

questions in their preferred space.” (Anderson, 2007, p33).

The social networking site is one type of recent Web 2.0 innovation that has been embraced by university-aged young people. Facebook, for example, has only been in existence since 2004. During this brief period of time its diffusion amongst the young has been rapid. It achieved one million early adopters within its first year of operation. By the end of its second year this had grown to five million users.

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Within four years, participation in the site had exceeded 50 million active users (Facebook, 2007). The original purpose of the site was to facilitate social networking between classmates and former classmates.

The success of Facebook and similar sites has prompted universities (and many other types of organisation) to explore how they might use social networking sites to engage with the millions of members of university age. Will this 'expansionary' innovation (Osborne, 1998), using the social networking artefact for different purposes, be successful?

In this chapter, I argue that universities are misguided in their attempts to use social networking groups to attempt to engage with students registered with the sites. I present empirical evidence from a case study university to substantiate this claim. The majority of students are active participants in Web 2.0 in general and social networking sites in particular. Universities appear to have adopted a technological-deterministic approach towards social networking sites, assuming that diffusion among their student body will follow the path identified by Rogers (1995). However, here it is suggested that this innovation is socially shaped and its diffusion is better explained using a 'technology complex' comprising of hard characteristics, such as the artefact, plus softer aspects, such as the culture of the user group (Fleck and Howells, 2001). Four categories of university-related groups are identified on Facebook and the technology complex is utilised to explain the varying success of the diffusion of the innovation in each of the four categories. Based on this analysis, and the results of a survey of student attitudes, I conclude that the softer aspects of the technology complex are likely to inhibit the diffusion of most university-initiated groups on social networking sites.

The chapter is organised as follows. First, several perspectives on the diffusion of innovation are introduced. These theoretical frameworks will form the basis of the subsequent discussion of

adoption of social networks in the chapter. Next, the methodology used in the empirical research is presented. Following this, the findings of the case study research are presented and discussed and conclusions drawn. Recommendations are made to university administrators considering using social networking websites and questions are raised concerning the applicability of current diffusion of innovation theory to emerging Web 2.0 channels in which peer production is the predominant economic model.

PERSPECTIVES ON THE DIFFUSION OF INNOVATION

There are two prime theoretical approaches for exploring the diffusion of a technological innovation through a population of social actors: diffusion of innovation (DOI) theory and social shaping theory (Webster, 2007).

Rogers, an early proponent of DOI theory, defines innovation as "an idea, practice, or object that is perceived as new by an individual or unit of adoption (1995, p.11)." This definition limits the innovation to the technological artefact. Diffusion then takes place when an innovator introduces this technology to a social group.

DOI theory is a technologically-deterministic approach. It is the characteristics of the technology, or to be more precise the artefact itself, that make it useful to its users and these characteristics will determine its ability to be accepted by a population. The diffusion of the innovation through a community takes the form of an S-shaped curve. In the early stages, the innovators and early adopters use the technology, then, at the peak of the S-curve, the majority are using it and, finally, the laggards within the community are persuaded to join in. Eventually, the technology is replaced when a superior technology becomes available.

Rogers (1995) does mention sociological aspects that might impede the diffusion of an innovation. Diffusion is likely to be less effective

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