

Chapter 1.15

Educational and Social Benefits of Social Network Sites: Applications to Human Services Education and Practice

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ABSTRACT

Online social network sites present opportunities for human service educators, practitioners, and clients. Human services education students can collaborate through multimedia networks, sharing ideas and experiences. Human services professionals can leverage online networks to problem solve, socialize and develop common resources, and clients can use such networks to engage in self-reflection and get support from those facing similar challenges. This chapter offers an introduction to online social network sites, summarizing their features, uses, demographics, and trends, and presents emerging research on their social and educational potential. An accompanying case study reveals how young adults might use online social network sites to further personal and educational goals. The chapter concludes with a discussion of how such sites might

be employed by human services education students, practitioners and clients.

'In education there should be no class distinction'.

Confucius (K'ung Fu tzu 551-479 BC), *Analects*, ch.15, v.38 in *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* (2004, p.238:8).

OPENING VIGNETTE

It is seven o'clock in the evening. Emilio has just finished dinner with his family and retreats to his bedroom to check in on the other social network in his life. Like the majority of U.S. online teens who are daily users of a social network site, logging twenty minutes to an hour or more, Emilio goes to MySpace.com and signs in. Once within

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his profile page — his entry point to this online international community — he notices that several things have changed among his “friends” in just the few hours since he last communicated with them. Looking at his list of “updates” he notices that Julia has joined the network. Alex has written in his blog about the challenges of college life. Jade has finished her midterm and thinks she did okay. Whitney has become a supporter of the Democratic president-elect, Barack Obama, and Jose has added four new photos of his new dorm room. Emilio accepts Julia as a friend so she can see his complete online profile. He comments, “Congratulations!” on Jade’s update. He visits Alex’s page to leave a comment about his blog entry on college life. He visits Whitney’s profile to see what other people have said about her support for the U.S. president. He visits his own home page to read comments friends have left him about a video he created for a school project about sports casting, his career interest. Earlier, he had posted an unfinished essay for sociology in his blog so that friends could give feedback on what he had written. Using the instant messaging feature within the MySpace network, Emilio messages another classmate who appears to be online and asks for advice on a social work assignment. He stays logged into the MySpace system while he works on his homework, waiting for friends to respond to his requests and comments. Soon messages began to appear. One friend instant messages some feedback on the sociology essay. Another friend compliments him on the finished video, and another gives him advice on the psychology assignment. At nine o’clock, Emilio changes his MySpace mood setting to “tired” and signs out of the network. His work is finished. He looks forward to following up with his friends on the night’s events when he meets them tomorrow, online or off.

INTRODUCTION

This opening vignette describes some of the many ways young people participate in online social network sites (SNSs). Emilio (a pseudonym) was a shy, soft-spoken eighteen year old who had a few close friends at university. Within MySpace (www.myspace.com), however, Emilio had a large network of friends, acquaintances, and contacts from within and outside his local community. His MySpace profile contained videos and photos he had created and posted to share. Often portrayed in the media as dangerous or distracting (Hass, 2006; Rowan, 2007), many young people are actually making important, positive connections through their use of online social network sites. They find emotional support, get help with school work, relax, socialize and flourish in using this outlet for their creativity.

The purpose of this chapter is to explore the social and educational benefits of online social network sites and the implications of social network site affordances for human services education and practice. The unique features of today’s social network sites will be discussed in relation to other forms of virtual communities. The chapter will present theoretical foundations, application of social network site features to education and ways in which the competencies users demonstrate in social network sites can have educational benefits and enhance learners’ experience. Moreover, a case study of one students’ use of an online social network will be provided for tertiary social work students who seek to consider the potential application of this information communication technology for human services education and practice. This case study may also be useful for researchers in the field of information communication technology and human computer interaction in various disciplines who seek to describe and illuminate online social networking practices.

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