Chapter 15

Facebook or Faceblock:
Cautionary Tales Exploring the Rise of Social Networking within Tertiary Education

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents an introduction to an overview of the rise of social networking platforms, systems, and tools within tertiary education, through an analysis and exploration of one such platform, namely the popular social networking website Facebook. Social networking sites, like other Web 2.0 services, emphasize online socialization, collaboration, user-driven content generation, and sharing among users. They enable different forms of pedagogy equally as they disable and challenge more traditional teaching and learning approaches within tertiary education. In this chapter, various criticisms, challenges, and concerns in relation to the incorporation of the new tools within the student learning experience are explored. The chapter seeks to illuminate some of the educational possibilities of incorporating Web 2.0 social network structures provided by websites such as Facebook into academic courses, and to offer suggestions for effectively leveraging these emergent social networks to enhance the student learning experience.

INTRODUCTION

Educators have widely acknowledged the value of community building and social interaction with and among students, in both face-to-face and online classes (Palloff & Pratt, 2007; Chickering & Gamson, 1987). With the emergence of Web 2.0-based social networking sites such as Facebook (http://www.facebook.com/), learners have developed a social world that is parallel to and often interlinked with their everyday work and study activities. The deep penetration of web technologies into the lives of students has been highlighted by a number of researchers (e.g., Conole, de Laat, Dillon, & Darby, 2006; Green & Hannon, 2007; Kamel Boulos & Wheeler, 2007) and their immersion in digital technology is argued to have influenced the interests, attitudes, and aptitudes of

students in ways significant for education. Multiple studies and authors (see Frand, 2000; Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005a; Tapscott, 1999) suggest that the digital generation learns differently compared with preceding generations of students. Many researchers see Web 2.0 as having the potential to transform e-learning and traditional teaching methods (Lytras & Naeve, 2006; Owen, Grant, Sayers, & Facer, 2006; Kohut, Parker, Keeter, Doherty, & Dimock, 2007), and current research shows a growing interest in ways of harnessing the new opportunities offered to improve the student learning experience (Kamel Boulos & Wheeler, 2007; Anderson, 2007). Suggested is that Web 2.0 tools, including social networking sites, offer possibilities to assist in a move from paradigms of teacher-centered, "sage on the stage" delivery of instruction in which learners are passive recipients, towards the facilitation of active, participatory, co-collaborative interactions that transcend traditional classroom boundaries.

Student use of Web 2.0-based social networks (e.g., Facebook and MySpace) has provoked a variety of responses from teachers and educational institutions (refer to Huijser, 2008 and also to later sections within this chapter dealing with specific strategies as well as challenges). Some schools in the USA have explicitly banned these sites and blocked them from being accessed on campus (Cameron & Fox, 2007), while many educators' blogs anecdotally expound the pedagogic benefits of these tools and advocate their use to enhance teaching, learning, and assessment. Regardless of the policies and views of teachers and institutions, students are virally immersing themselves into online social networks. Successful realization of the potential and possibilities of Web 2.0-based social networking requires a thorough understanding of the potential barriers influencing acceptance of these technologies by educators and learners alike. The capabilities of the current wave of online spaces for social networking and their application in tertiary education raise a range of questions connected to copyright,

content ownership, privacy and identity online, content reuse, and the role/place of the educator in these social networks.

The objectives of this chapter are to provide an overview of social networking sites, and, through an exploration of one illustrative example, Facebook, explore some of the educational possibilities, challenges, and cautionary tales relating to the rise of social networks within tertiary education. Some specific strategies and considerations are provided for the reader to ponder in relation to the pedagogic adoption of Facebook appropriate to a tertiary education context.

ONLINE SOCIAL NETWORKING

Lenhart and Madden (2007), in their report for the Pew Internet and American Life Project, state that social networking use has quadrupled in the last three years among adults in the U.S., and that roughly 35% of adults now have profiles on social networking sites. However, it is arguable that the Internet has been used for social networking since its early days, even before the genesis of the World Wide Web. Early adopters engaged in online interactions through newsgroups, listservs, and discussion forums, and participated in communities comprised of individuals who possessed the ability to access and technical competence to make use of these forms of online communication.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, online social networking became more proliferate with the emergence of sites like Friendster and MySpace. These sites allow people to create personal profiles and build networks of connections with others. More recently, Facebook, incorporating ease of use and ability to connect with others of shared interests, moved social networking from the domain of early adopters into the mainstream. Stutzman (2007) offers the following depiction of the capabilities of and user experience offered by sites such as MySpace and Facebook:

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