

Chapter 20

Online Learning Communities in UAE Schools: Opportunities and Challenges

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ABSTRACT

The emergence of the Internet in a time when the world was struggling to cope with new information systems and technologies has put additional burdens on businesses, individuals, and societies, not only to adapt to new ways but also to creatively explore feasible applications and opportunities to drive improvements in all walks of life. This has translated into a multitude of tangible and intangible improvements and has generally improved decision making as a direct result of improved data storages, faster data processing, and retrieval. For educators, the Internet has provided excellent opportunities to improve the processes of online collaborative learning to complement conventional classes as well as reaping the benefits from information and knowledge bases that are relatively easy to access and are ready to share by both educators and students alike. This chapter explores the opportunities and challenges associated with using Internet Online Learning Communities to complement and aid conventional classes and enhance learning outcomes in UAE schools. The study describes the use of online forums to support English language classes in Al Foah Primary School, weighing its pros and cons and identifying lessons learned.

INTRODUCTION

The maturity and affordability of information technology hardware and software over the past decade, coupled with major breakthroughs in the communication side of technology have led to a general trend of merging both information technol-

ogy and communication technology disciplines, since the software had always the control over the utility of the hardware. This is described as ‘the infrastructure that operates the technology of information’ and has proven to be popular and capable of serving a wider audience at the same time. Initially, the audience was comprised of organizations and universities exchanging information that transformed the basic level of ordinary

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people from not only seeking information, but also contributing in its evolution.

The term Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has started to find its way in academic research and the literature as a more representative term to describe new technology applications that make use of Information Technology (IT) and Communication Technology (CT) components. Typically, new applications, systems and business solutions would be a combination of software, hardware and networks including the internet.

Analog cellular or mobile phones when introduced represented a breakthrough in the communication industry by providing the convenience to users to connect from anywhere via phone calls and text messages. Driven by rapid change and demand, the manufacturers of these industries understood the impact of the Internet and met the demands of both: the revolution of technology and the change in the public needs and requirements to turn ordinary mobile phones into smart ones that merged the internet with its applications into all aspects. The advent in the digital technology and the applications of the Internet have both contributed to a shift succeeded to redefine the design and function of cellular phones to become conveniently small, mobile computers and computers communication devices that laid the foundation for social networking connectivity and virtual communities' models where the users are online and reachable.

Internet generation (Web2.0) paved the way for new networking models using Wikis, Blogs, Chat rooms and discussion forums that has found great appeal and acceptance among the younger generations as alternative models to physical interaction and socializing. Today youngsters use of Web2.0 social networking applications to locate friends and peers of similar interests, needs, goals or even issues and problems beyond the usual limitations, thereby changing the way people interact with each other -- dissolving any kind of social, cultural or physical boundaries.

This explains the exponentially increasing number of subscribers to social network sites, such as, Facebook, Twitter, Google and Wikis, LinkedIn, blogs, journals all of which can be accessed through a personal computer, a laptop or a mobile phone where these social networks act as a medium for people to discuss an issue or a topic. These varied methods of communication between members have changed and influenced the way they document and connect their daily lives.

The past decade has not only witnessed unprecedented changes of socialization and interaction patterns among youngsters, but also the introduction of new applications that have enhanced and improved productivity, thereby making social networks enjoyable, attractive and addictive, as well as models used by businesses and education entities. Using social networks for educational purposes was introduced long before the appearance of the Internet by means of connecting personal computers on a local or wide area networks.

As a practical observation, it is only normal nowadays to expect the majority of UAE students to bring along with them to school, college or university one or more smart phones or technology devices such as blackberries or iPhones, laptops, tablets or hand-held devices. Such devices have huge capabilities in terms of access to information and to download thousands of free or (affordable) applications over the Internet. Practical observation also indicates that the majority of students regularly and frequently access their preferred networks and chatting forums, including, but not limited to: Facebook, iTunes, YouTube, Skype, or Twitter, many times daily thereby making the learning experience more appealing, more enjoyable and enhancing of ordinary school subjects.

The chapter reflects on the experience of using online technology by creating a mobile learning community for a grade nine students in a UAE elementary school. The main trigger to consider the creation of an online community was that accessing the Internet using different technological devices

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