

Chapter 8

A Social Network Strategy for the Social Marketing of Online Courses and Learning Resources in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

In virtually all institutions of higher learning, there is the development of online courses to meet local demands foremost but also to potentially glean from an international cadre of learners. Various universities may offer curricular topics relevant to a much larger context. This chapter makes the case that network science may be applied to marketing online courses in higher education to reach target learners. This focuses on some real-world instructional design cases and the marketing strategies used. These cases are then analyzed using a social network strategy approach, which is first described here. Finally, there are ideas on how to apply a social network strategy to various online learning “products.”

INTRODUCTION

As a part of the teaching and learning mission of an institution of higher education, many courses, trainings, and digital learning objects (DLOs) are created. These objects require a complex subject matter expert (SME) skill set along with expertise in instructional design and multimedia. Given the high cost of staff time, not to

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mention the acquisition of expertise, universities and colleges have a shared interest in ensuring that such resources get used, whether the target audience includes enrolled learners, novices and amateurs, the general public, or professionals in the field. The affordances of online learning mean that the potential learner base may come from anywhere in the world.

The development team that creates the online learning often works with a public relations team to publicize the course or learning opportunity. In other cases, the development team itself may have to handle outreach and marketing because of resource scarcity. In an age of high social connectivity, network science may help practitioners hone their marketing strategies; it may help identify which stakeholders are most critical for a particular project and which outreach strategies may be most effective.

BACKGROUND

While the study of social networks has existed for over 80 years (stemming from sociology), with the first sociograms made in the 1930s, the application of network analysis software has been a fairly recent phenomenon within the past 15 years or so. A basic sociogram consists of node-link diagrams (linegraphs) of points and lines placed on a two-dimensional graph (with an x and y axis). The nodes represent entities (individuals or groups), and the lines between the nodes represent relationships. Sociograms may be studied as single egos (a singular node) and its ego-neighborhood (the central ego and the “alters”/other nodes in its direct-link ego neighborhood). Egos have their own attributes or descriptors which inform their behaviors in the network. Said another way, egos have “biases” or preferences or properties.

Social Network Analysis: Social networks may also be analyzed at other units of analysis: dyads (pairs of nodes); subclusters or cliques; islands (intensely connected groupings in a social network); partitions (parts of a social network), or entire social networks (its content nodes, its relationships, its interconnectivity, the resources moving through it, and other factors). Fat nodes are those which are centralized in a network and receive inputs from other nodes. Its “in-degree” is high (or it has a lot of resources coming in from other nodes). Thin nodes have few ties to other nodes, and they are peripheral to a social network (but they may have power in boundary-spanning or bridging connections between different social networks that do not normally interact). Affiliation (non-kin) networks show how non-family-related people interact in a group, with the most connected members at the center, the less connected ones in the sub-periphery, and then the least connected (like “isolates” or nodes which do not connect to any other member and “pendants”

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