

Social Networking Tools for Teacher Education

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Abstract: The emerging social networking tools that are ready to incorporate in educational settings and their popularity among younger generations make them compelling applications for higher education faculty. The interest and growth in social networking do not only represent new emerging technologies that may possibly be used in education, but they also refer to the networks where communication and interaction affect the way we know and learn things. This paper first reviews the literature on social networks and then discusses their possible adoption in teacher education. It is the authors' hope that the paper provides insight to teacher educators so the integration process would be seamless in teacher education programs.

Introduction

One of the buzzwords in education nowadays is Web 2.0 technologies, social networking services and a variety of open social software programs that go into the education market almost daily. Often times all of these terms are used interchangeably. Web 2.0 is “a term often applied to a perceived ongoing transition of the World Wide Web from a collection of websites to a full-fledged computing platform serving web applications to end users. It refers to a supposed second-generation of Internet-based services—such as social networking sites, wikis, communication tools, and folksonomies—that emphasize online collaboration and sharing among users.” (Anonymouse, 2007). Solomon and Schrum (2007) state Web 2.0 is “an invented term” that was used for the first time by Tim O’Reilly in 2004. It involves the collection of new and emerging Web-based tools that are oftentimes free of charge, social in nature, and encourage users to express themselves in ways that are useful to them. In a few short years the number of Web 2.0 tools has increased significantly. This may be attributed to the fact that users find it appealing because it is web based, collaborative, involves a multitude of individuals who collaborate, and has shared content. The “All things Web 2.0” (www.allthingsweb2.com/) directory lists thousands of tools that are available and it even ranks them for their popularity.

Open social software is defined as software that enables people to collaborate, interact and connect with each other using software whose source code is public and so can be used, modified or re-distributed by its users. On the other hand, social networking websites function like an online community of internet users and focus on members who have a common interest in topics. When they are given access to the social networking site they socialize by reading profile pages of members and interact with selected members by using the software (Anonymous c, 2007). For social networks to work, certain software should be used. Although the notion of social networking is not a new concept (for instance, Usenets in 1980s), a number of services have begun to flourish in recent years (e.g., MySpace, Facebook, Friendster, EduSpaces, Yahoo! 360° and LinkedIn). The Pew Report’s (2005, January) findings are quite striking to understand the future of social networks:

By 2014, the use of the Internet will increase the size of people’s social networks far beyond what has traditionally been the case. People will increasingly turn to these networks to make important decisions and will have a wider range of sources from which to discover and verify information about common interest. We will use term social networking throughout this paper, and provide a summary of their possible use in teacher education. (A list of social networks that teacher educators might find useful is provided in the appendix of this paper).

Features and Characteristics of Social Networks

A review of the literature on social networks has revealed there are numerous features and characteristics associated with this concept. They are briefly described below:

1. Most of the social networking sites provide multiple services to the users such as email, instant messaging, chat, video, blogging, file sharing, photo-sharing, etc. so users can easily interact with each other.
2. Social networking sites provide a database of users so people can find their friends, form communities, and connect with others who share similar interests with them.
3. Most social network services allow users to create their profiles online and articulate their social networks. "This is done through 'friend' requests, wherein one user asks another to approve the connection. If the relationship is approved, the person shows up on the users' friends list and vice versa" (Lampe, Ellison & Steinfield, 2007).
4. The majority of social networking services are free of charge. Users can connect with each other at a very low cost.
5. Although there are currently hundreds of social networks, Boyd and Ellison (2007) emphasize the fact that "most sites support the maintenance of pre-existing social networks, but others help strangers connect based on shared interests, political views, or activities. Some sites cater to diverse audiences, while others attract people based on common language or shared racial, sexual, religious, or nationality-based identities. Sites also vary in the extent to which they incorporate new information and communication tools, such as mobile connectivity, blogging, and photo/video-sharing". (Boyd & Ellison, 2007, ¶2)
6. Most of the social networks regularly add new features based on user feedback. In the same line, open source versions allow users to develop their own applications and incorporate them into the social networking site.
7. Most services allow users to set up their own access and privacy rules. To what degree users would like to share their information with the outside world is based on users' choice.
8. Boyd and Ellison (2007) argue that the rise of social networks shifted the focus from content, topic or interest based first generation online communities to individual-focused, personal online communities.

Faculty Use of Social Networks

For students to master 21st century types of skills such as social networking and Web 2.0 faculty must be trained and model the skills themselves in order to effectively guide students in learning to use these new tools. Two timely teacher professional development techniques were advocated when training teachers: (1) help teachers become aware of their notions of the classroom community and how these relate to technology and its potential use, and (2) design and implement teacher professional development activities that embed social-networking types of tools that are of value to the teacher that we as trainers would like the teacher to consider using (Solomon & Schrum, 2007).

In May 2007 Thomson Publishing, an academic publishing company, surveyed more than 600 college professors focusing on their use of social networking and Web 2.0 for instructional purposes. The survey revealed the majority of the professors did not use social networking sites or Web 2.0 tools even though they were familiar with some of the popular web sites. One of the interesting findings of this survey is the number of faculty members who had their own blogs, 10 percent. This was no different from the general U.S. population who had blogs, 8 percent. Furthermore, according to Horizon Report published by Educause in 2007, students' views of what is and what is not technology are increasingly different from the views of faculty. While growing interest in social software is undeniable, social software is still rarely used in college classrooms today.

An early survey results

The Thomson Learning survey was conducted in early 2007 with 677 professors. The majority of the professors who were included in this study "have been teaching for more than 10 years at four- or two-year colleges and universities on the subjects of humanities/social sciences or business/economics at their respective institutions" (Thomson Publishing, 2007, ¶9). The results of this survey were interesting in that most faculty recognized the value of emerging technologies such as blogs and podcasting in the classroom. Some of the highlights of this survey were:

- Nearly 50 percent of the faculty respondents who are familiar with social networking sites stated they feel the new and emerging technology sites have or will change the way students learn.
- Nearly 90 percent of the respondents who are familiar with social networking sites reported they know about sites that allow students to grade or rate professors, and 67 percent have checked if they have been graded or not.
- While the majority of faculty surveyed do not use social networking sites, those who do use them for both personal and work purposes.
- Nearly 35 percent of the respondents view pod casting as a valuable communication tool to reach students.
- Nearly 10 percent of faculty members surveyed indicate they have their own blogs. Comparatively, fewer than 8 percent of Americans have a blog (Thomson Publishing, 2007, ¶3-7).

Implications for Teacher Education

The popularity of social networking services is growing worldwide. For today's college students, the use of such services is part of their daily practice. According to Horizon Report (2007) "they are already second nature to many students; our challenge is to apply it to education" (p.12). The following are a few implications teacher educators can consider:

- Voithofer (2007) argues that teaching social networks and Web 2.0 technologies can result in productive conversations with pre-service teachers about "1) the technical and pedagogical characteristics of educational technology, 2) the social aspects of educational technology, and 3) how to think about emerging technologies in relation to teaching (p.11).
- "Leveraging the networking capabilities of the Internet to develop social networks beyond the classroom may give teachers and students access to a different culture that helps them clarify their beliefs about teaching with technology and revise their behaviors" (Greenhow, 2007, p.1991).
- The nature of social networks is collaborative, flexible, and borders between categories that are contingent by nature. Such interconnectivity of technologies may "allow teacher education programs to provide better integration and continuity across multiple courses" (Voithofer, 2007, p.16). She also warns us that if teachers and students don't see instructional value of social networks clearly they may get frustrated.
- It is essential for teacher education students to understand and use social networks, develop their professional identity through online communities, and question and criticize 'social' aspects of such networks. Social networking sites are becoming important part of information literacy skills for K12 students.
- More and more schools are developing their own social networking sites (such as Pennster of the University of Pennsylvania). Teacher education programs may consider adopting such campus-based social networking sites as safer and more convenient options to free access sites.
- Course management systems that are widely used in today's teacher education programs as a means of blended or online instruction are focused on course or content based delivery methods. Emerging and open source course management systems such as Moodle, Sakai, which allow learners to customize and individualize learning process, are emerging as better fit for today's students.
- There is an interesting body of current research on how students feel about their professors having profiles on social networking sites (Hewitt& Forte, 2006; Mazer, Murphy & Simonds, 2007). This phenomenon should be investigated further so dynamics of student-faculty relationships through social networks can be understood better. Overall, there is limited research on the use of social networks that help us understand who is using such communities and for what purpose. "There are significant shifts taking place in scholarship, research, creative expression, and learning, and a profound need for leadership at the highest levels of the academy that can see the opportunities in these shifts and carry them forward" (Horizon Report, 2007, p.4).

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Appendix: List of Social Networking Sites for Teacher Educators

- Del.icio.us (social bookmarking) <http://del.icio.us/>
- Stu.dicio.us (Social note taking for students) <http://www.solutionwatch.com/476/studicious-social-notetaking-for-students>
- MySpace (social networking) <http://www.myspace.com>
- Facebook (social networking) <http://www.facebook.com>
- EduSpaces (educational social networking) <http://www.eduspaces.net>
- IHMC CMap Tools (social concept mapping) <http://cmap.ihmc.us/>
- Flickr (social photo-sharing) <http://www.flickr.com>
- Google Docs (social writing) <http://www.google.com/docs>

- Slide Share (social slide/power point sharing) <http://www.slideshare.net/>
- LibraryThing (social cataloging web application) <http://www.librarything.com/>
- CiteULike (academic social bookmarking/citation) <http://www.citeulike.org/>
- Connotea (social reference management) <http://www.connotea.org/>
- BibSonomy (Social bookmarking and publication sharing) <http://www.bibsonomy.org/>