

Social networking sites within Higher Education – threat or opportunity?

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***Abstract:** Social networking sites on the Internet have rapidly become a major force in the lives of young people today. These sites in the wider domain allow the opportunity for students to communicate with a wider network of people, whereas similar facilities within the virtual learning environments developed by higher education institutions only allow for a much narrower social grouping and interaction.*

At a time where widening access to higher education and promoting lifelong learning have been expressed as government educational objectives, questions arise as to the benefits, or otherwise, of social networking sites to students, staff and higher education institutions, not just in pedagogic terms, but also in engagement with the students in their own space. Should we see the development of social networking sites as a threat or an opportunity?

The social networking facilities provided by systems available within and external to higher education systems will be reviewed. A case study of the use of social networking within an in house virtual learning environment will be contrasted with the use of an external social networking site. The issues arising from the use of these facilities will be discussed and an attempt made to answer some of the questions arising and make recommendations for the use of social networking systems within higher education.

SOCIAL NETWORKING AND ITS ISSUES

Introduction. Social networks are inherent in the existence of communities and operate at various levels from within family units up to the level of nations. Social networking theory preceded the advent of computing and the Internet (Wasserman and Faus 1994). However it is only in the last few years that the enabling technology and expansion of the use of the Internet has made these systems accessible to a wider audience (Hiltz and Turoff, 1993). Early computing projects evolved to support the collaboration of groups of people engaged in common goals (Allen 2004). These projects were not aimed at developing social networks, rather the development of ideas and exchange of information in a focussed area of interest, however social networking sites on the Internet makes use of some of these tools. The term Social Software has become popular in recent years, referring to software that supports group working. However there is some overlap between the boundaries of systems that support the exchange of ideas and social exchange, as our research shows.

There are many popular social networking sites worldwide in various languages and targeting a range of interests. In most cases anyone can join a network, but registration is required to access some parts of the system, including the social networking facilities, which include posting a personal profile that can be accessed by anyone within the network if the user wishes. There is usually a notice board or forum element, which is an essential part of the site, being the equivalent of a communal

area where, users can make new friends, converse with each other and organise group social events. Anyone can contact another member of the network provided that the recipients profile allows this. Dr Will Reader believes that many people collect "friends" on MySpace and Facebook just for the sake of it (Smith, 2007). Most of their real friends are the same number that one would have regardless of social networking on the Internet.

Social Networking within Facebook. Facebook was originally created in 2004 by a student at Harvard University and intended to be used by students at that University for social purposes (Yadav 2006). However students from other Universities and Colleges were eventually allowed to join and membership rapidly spread. Membership is no longer limited to members of academic institutions and currently anyone can join and can create a new network or group, although access to a particular University or College network is more limited. Some of the networks relate to areas of interest centred around an academic institution, for example sports clubs. Other networks may represent a company, particular area or even a city. Perhaps this diversification may be a response to the competition from other social networking sites, where there may be a fear that eventually one of these will become dominant. However Dunbar's Number places an optimal maximum limit on the size of an individual's social network as 150 therefore in practice there may be little to gain from being a member of a very large network (Alumni Features, 2007).

Social Networking Issues Within and After Higher Education. A survey sponsored by HP Labs, monitored the traffic of 4.2 million Facebook users over a 26 month period. One of the findings indicated that it was being used almost as much during the working day as in the evenings (Golder et al, 2006).

At Penn State University the library service has been using Facebook as one method of allowing students to contact the librarians with enquiries. A survey conducted in 2006 found that more students were using Facebook to contact the librarians than any other method (Mack et al 2007). However if institutions use Facebook to post information they need to be aware of their terms of use. Whilst user content posted onto the site remains the intellectual property of the user, Facebook can archive and use the content, for example for promotional purposes, until the user chooses to remove the content (Facebook 2007).

Forums are a form of Social Software that can be a useful tool in education. Forums are also related to Blogs, though a blog is centered around an individual, whereas a forum is centred more around an area of interest (Holzsclag 2005). There are many blogs on the Internet posted by individuals to discuss subjects ranging from their personal lives to World events. However some students are using blogs to post and discuss their work and ideas so that others can comment and advise on it (Polly 2007). A forum can be useful when a particular topic or area of interest requires discussion on the Web. This concept is being used at Southampton Solent University.

Mazer et al (2007) studied the impact on student motivation when lecturers in higher education used Facebook and blogs to allow students to view their personal profiles and communicate with them. There may be a positive impact on climate within the classroom when students see staff as approachable, however there may be dangers in a negative impact on respect and credibility.

There are some other dangers of social networking over the Internet that one must be aware of before. Bugeja (2006) identifies many of the problems associated with the misuse of technology in the classroom, where students use their mobile phones

for voice calls or text messages and use social networking sites when they should be engaging with their studies. We have also noticed these issues. Technology can be as much a distraction as a tool in education. It may also result in the replacement of staff rather than the enhancement of learning. Parents and, perhaps more importantly, some employers regularly use Facebook to investigate the conduct of graduates whilst they are studying. Higher education administrators and academics are also increasingly part of this surveillance. Others may be watching too; in fact students face many dangers in leaving their profiles open to viewing by anyone.

Dr Bugeja also contributed to an online debate into higher education issues at Economist.com (2008). One of these issues included "Social Networking: does it bring large positive change to educational methods in and out of the classroom?". Almost two thirds of those voting on the outcome of the debate believed that social networking may bring positive change to education.

Now anyone can join social networking sites such as Facebook. Whilst, in the case of Facebook, one needs an email address from an academic institution to join some groups, anyone can join and form other groups. They can provide any name at sign up, which may not be their real name, and use a generic email address from any one of the free web email providers, that they could have signed up to in a similar way. Therefore traceability may be limited and problematic for large social networking sites. There have been problems with abusive behaviour and comments on social networking sites, including Facebook.

Facebook have terms and conditions that should theoretically prevent abuse. However some institutions have taken the issue so seriously that they have threatened students with legal action if they abuse staff, or bring the institution into disrepute. Social networking users in the U.K. are covered by defamation laws under the Defamation Act 1996 (Office of Public Sector Information). Most institutions have policies on staff and student abuse and harassment on their premises, and also for misusing IT facilities, that should cover written statements made publicly on the Internet. One institution that recently found evidence of staff abuse issued warnings to students of the risk of legal and disciplinary action in such cases. Some students responded with protests, including protest groups started on Facebook (Williams, 2007). However the University was merely re-stating what is already U.K. law and campus policy in most educational institutions. Oxford University have also taken this issue very seriously. They recently fined students for posting photographs of activities that were deemed to bring the University into disrepute on Facebook (McCloskey, 2007). Interestingly though Oxford University have their own channels on Youtube to promote the university.

If students do use the institutions IT facilities to abuse staff then they are likely to be in breach of the rules. These should cover abuse of staff even if students do not use the institutions IT facilities to perpetrate the offence. Institutions or individuals who are victims of abuse or libellous statements can take legal action against the abuser. If the evidence is clear and a case is answerable then the abuser may have to pay financial reparations and legal costs to the victim if the matter reaches court. Institutions should take this issue seriously as the very reputation of educational institutions, and not just their staff, are at stake. Amendments to institution rules, or perhaps clarification of existing ones, may need to be made in order to account for this new threat.

However students who use Facebook should be aware that their actions may be policed by the people that they may least expect. Future employers are increasingly using Facebook to vet the activities of graduates seeking employment. A recent

survey found that 8% of recruiters are using Facebook to find information on potential employees (icWales.co.uk, 2007). So it seems that employers will increasingly use Facebook to vet employees and even conduct surveillance. There have been cases where employees have been dismissed for making adverse comments about their employers. Students may face little real sanction for such a thing, but it is clear that the situation is dramatically different within the workplace.

Another survey found that use of Facebook is costing businesses £130 million per day, amounting to around 2 hours per person lost due to Facebook use (BBC News 2007). The outcomes of the survey recommended firm action on the use of social networking at work. In fact many businesses are banning Facebook access at work. Clearly many businesses see the use of social networking sites as detrimental to their business (CIPD, 2007).

Another danger that users of social networking sites should be aware of is misuse of personal information by criminals. Users should be careful about how much personal information they give away in their profiles, or in communication with strangers. Possible dangers are financial fraud through identity theft and even problems with sex offenders using the information to commit offences (Leyden, 2006)

So, with all these problems what can or has been done with social software and social networking systems within Higher Education and should we be encouraging students to use them?

CASE STUDIES IN SOCIAL NETWORKING AND VIRTUAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

Facebook at Southampton Solent University

At Southampton Solent University, students predominantly use Facebook to advertise social and sporting events, make new friends, or chat among existing friends. There are currently over 6,200 members of the “official” Southampton Solent network, which represents around 40% of all students at the University, though there may be more in other groups. Currently there seem to be at least 150 different groups representing areas of interest under the umbrella of the University, ranging from the bizarre to sports clubs, social activities and academic related interests. Most of these groups have a small membership. There are also alumni groups, and some specific course related groups. These seem to have been formed, not by staff, but by students. For example there is a group for journalism students and another for business studies. There is a mixture of social chit-chat, but also course related self help discussion. The journalism students are also giving each other leads on where they can get work experience.

Observing the day to day postings of students shows that the vast majority are positive postings relating to social and other events. Evidence indicates that students are using Facebook primarily to maintain a satisfactory social life and to be part of the University community, which likely contributes to enhancement of their learning experience.

Whilst most academic staff do not appear to be currently posting events within the University, some students are advertising or even organising course related events on Facebook. They are acting as leaders within the student community. Thus some courses in specialist fields seem to have a more cohesive community of students than others on perhaps more generic courses.

Abuse has been observed by a small, but vocal minority. Investigation suggests there may be a correlation between the inability of the students concerned to engage in their academic activities and the time that they spend engaging in unproductive non-academic activities, such as casual social networking on the Internet. That would appear to be the case for the minority reported. There are various channels for students to give feedback on aspects of their course, an institution's facilities or the staff. These channels also allow anonymity. However the complaining students may look to blame anyone else, except themselves, if they realise that they haven't been engaging in their studies. One would need to investigate the background to these issues. If these individuals ever graduate then they should be aware that their activities are likely to be scrutinised by future employers monitoring Facebook. On the other hand the positive minded students are in the vast majority and are likely to be a good advertisement for the University and their own personal strengths

Our students are using Facebook so perhaps we should join in to enhance our teaching. Some staff are members of Facebook, however most are currently using this for social networking external to the university, rather than directly with our own current students, though some have found Facebook to be very useful in keeping in contact with our alumni. Facebook offers a communication channel to extend the university community outside of the bounds of the University. The importance of maintaining contact with alumni cannot be under-estimated. It is very important for us to keep in contact with the evolving needs of business and industry to inform our curriculum development and provide leads for graduate employment. Our alumni are one of the links with industry.

As we have seen research has indicated there are educational benefits from social interaction between students and staff, but there are also dangers. One benefit may be that students see us as more approachable. Students will perhaps be able to relate to us better, and thus will be better motivated. Nevertheless the dangers that we perceive are that, with closer social interaction may come familiarity which could reduce our independence and affect credibility. The other issue is that students may see us as having invaded their space. Thus they may not be so open with their views and they may migrate to other social networking sites rather than allowing us to join in. However one could argue that this may encourage a more positive atmosphere to counter some of the problems identified, hence we should perhaps get in there and let them know that we are around.

Virtual Learning Environments and myCourse at SSU. The current generation of Virtual Learning Environments (VLE) were only possible with the advent of computer networks, and later the Internet. Prior to the widespread adoption of the Internet and the advent of the user friendly web browser technology VLEs amounted to little more than file sharing or use of computer based learning material. At Southampton Solent University (SSU) the early forms of VLE were little more than web pages developed by course teams to post lecture notes and other information (Almpanis et al, 2007). The first multi-purpose VLE, as we currently understand it, came in the form of a system called Learnwise, implemented within the University in 2000. This enabled lecture notes, news and other information to be easily accessed by students who enrolled on each unit. It also allowed lecturers to post tests and monitor student access to the material within the VLE. Eventually it was decided that a replacement for this system was required that would allow enhanced functionality. It was decided to adopt the Moodle VLE, known as "myCourse", an Open Source solution customised by the University to meet its own requirements. Students must be enrolled on a course at the University to use myCourse facilities, which includes interactive forums and limited social networking within the social grouping of staff and students at the University. Therefore social networking outside of these groups is

currently not possible, limiting social interaction with the wider world. Nevertheless some courses within the University are using the social networking facilities of myCourse to encourage academic social interaction in the form of peer learning and self help groups.

When students log in they are made aware of a very clear policy on the acceptable terms of use of myCourse, including refraining from abusive or offensive comments, etc. They are also presented with a link to the University's Internet usage policy.

Use of MyCourse Forums. The forums were not intended to be used as a social networking tool in this context, however social interaction is a necessary part of the process of their usage, and it is useful to examine the student interaction that they allow. Within the database subject team we have for several years been actively encouraging students to use electronic forums within the university's VLE to share sources of information and to discuss concepts within specific topic areas. Indeed most of our database units now include the use of forums as an element of summative assessment (typically 5% of a 20 CATS unit).

Our initial motivation for this approach was primarily to improve the breadth of background reading of the students and to help us identify areas of poor understanding. It has also been useful in the struggle to encourage students not to leave all the work until the last minute without achieving an excessive assessment marking overhead, although of course we do need to monitor the forums regularly.

We initially ran into student resistance to this approach from both ends of the student achievement spectrum. The more conscientious students complained that they did not see why they should share the results of their efforts with others who did not contribute and, interestingly, commenting that they already shared information with others who returned the favour, mostly through MSN chat. The less engaged students were unhappy at being identified as not contributing at an earlier stage before the submission date than they regarded as reasonable. Including credit for the forum contributions in the summative assessment overcame much of this resistance from both groups; the conscientious because they get credit for something they were essentially doing anyway, and the others because this work is perceived as 'easy marks'.

Example assessment criteria from one level two unit are as follows:

40-49%	Has made meaningful contributions to the forums
50-59%	Contributions on a range of topics evidence understanding of relevant issues
60-69%	Has initiated areas of collaborative research
70%+	Has taken a lead in structuring and summarising discussions in a range of topics

The remaining resistance has melted away with the introduction of the myCourse VLE. myCourse provides a far more stable, flexible and easy to use environment compared to the previous VLE. For example, uploading files is simpler, and a wider range of formats can be read. The inclusion and opening of web links within the forums is also more user friendly.

Although we do not encourage what might be described as 'socialising' within the forums we find that they are increasingly being used for messages such as: '*thanks, you saved my bacon, let me know if you need anything*' and for requests for information or clarification on specific issues that receive replies along the lines of '*no*

I don't get that either' and 'makes no sense to me' as well as 'this link gives a good explanation of that as well as a lot of other relevant stuff'.

In our view this is where the forums cross over into true social networking amongst students and raises the issue of how closely the forum content should be managed by us. Clearly it is helpful to monitor them regularly to find out what areas the students are having difficulties with. But should we be intervening (or interfering) in the discussion process? We have found that the best approach is to:

- a) ensure that the students are aware that the forums are being monitored by referring often to issues raised in them during lectures and tutorials.
- b) show restraint and avoid taking over discussions in order to allow the communication between students to flow freely, but
- c) contribute when inaccurate or misleading information is being disseminated. It is important when doing this to avoid discrediting the original contributor. Phrases such as *'I know what you mean but the way you have expressed it could be misunderstood, I would put it ...'* or *'An interesting idea but have you thought about ... Perhaps ...'* are appropriate.

We now find the forums a popular and effective approach to encouraging sharing of ideas and in particular information sources on subject specific topics. To anyone who wishes to do likewise we would stress that it is essential to:

- (a) have a stable and user-friendly VLE environment,
- (b) give students some form of reward for their contributions,
- (c) be careful about the way in which you intervene in the process.

Use of Wikis. Wikis are typically used by a community of users to build up a repository of information or an encyclopaedia of knowledge. Whilst by definition they may allow little direct social interaction, they can be a useful community based educational support tool. The University's myCourse environment also provides wiki facilities that allow tutors to set up wikis for the exclusive use of a tutor-defined group. These are being used in some of our courses to support team working. Prior to this facility being available in our VLE some of them were setting up their own external wikis for this purpose. Some computing students also use private wikis for their final year project logs instead of the more traditional log books or files.

In one level 3 course, Process Analysis and Requirements Engineering (PARE), software engineering students are required to undertake and manage a real world software development project as a team, and are assessed on the contents of the project library and an evaluation of the process undertaken.

From the student perspective the use of a wiki for the project library overcomes some difficulties in arranging mutually convenient face to face meeting times that are so common in team work. They also help to encourage all team members to contribute since students are aware that the wikis are monitored by the tutor. It is an essential rule for this use of wikis that every contribution is credited to a specific individual and dated.

From the tutor's point of view the wikis allow regular monitoring of project progress throughout the year which not only helps in identifying times when a little nagging (of individuals or groups) is helpful but also reduces the amount of reading that needs to be done at the end of year when assessing the work.

Perhaps because computing students feel at home with electronic media, we find that wikis inevitably include material of a social nature such as *'does anyone else think we should cancel the meeting this week due to pressure of other work'*.

Explicit Social Networking uses. One of the teams within the PARE course is currently working on developing a private social networking environment for students and alumni of our Journalism programme. The system was requested by the programme leader with the primary aim of enabling her to stay in touch with alumni in order to track their careers for professional accreditation purposes. Another principle aim is to help her students and new graduates find work within the industry by putting them in touch with others already working in the industry. Interestingly some of our Journalism alumni and students are already using a FaceBook group for this purpose as well as arranging social gatherings.

The intention is that the system being developed should run on the University's intranet, which raises issues with alumni access to our intranet – an issue beyond the scope of this paper, but nonetheless one that needs to be addressed if we wish to use electronic media to extend social networking amongst our students and alumni.

In conclusion, within the computing courses at least we find that students are ready and able to make use of electronic media for study purposes and that their natural inclination is to extend this to include what might accurately be described as social networking. Our journalism students are clearly also motivated to network electronically but this is, of course, a subject discipline where networking skills are important. We also find that being involved in this process is beneficial to us as teachers. The use of social networking may be more appropriate to the needs of certain courses than to others.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It is clear that academics and higher education institutions need to be aware of the educational threats as well as strengths associated with social networking on the Internet.

To make social networking sites like FaceBook a beneficial opportunity it may be necessary to adapt institutional policies to better cover the use of external Internet sites to prevent problems and allow them to play a positive role in the educational community. These resources may help students to feel less isolated, and therefore less likely to drop-out. Although one could argue that overuse of this facility could cause them to drop-out. Students can still be part of the community once they have graduated. Networking with graduates has many important advantages for each institution.

Staff should perhaps be encouraged to participate in social networking sites to at least passively monitor, if not positively engage in the online community. Pro-active use of systems like Facebook among staff may demonstrate that academics are approachable, although there may be dangers in over-familiarity. Thus, staff must be careful and consistent in their approach to all. However staff and students need to be made aware of the risks involved in giving too much personal information away when using social networking sites.

Virtual Learning Environments like myCourse now have reasonably sophisticated social networking-like facilities, although the user base is restricted. The experiments with myCourse at SSU has demonstrated that social interaction outside of the classroom has a very useful academic role to play. The students are using self helps groups outside of the VLE, thus improving their independent learning capabilities.

With the proliferation of resources on the Internet it is more difficult to guarantee the originality of student work for assessment purposes. Instead of marking the end result in the form of a piece of work handed in on a particular date, it would be at least as useful to also assess the process. Our experience has shown that the contribution to forums, wikis and self help groups can be monitored and form part of the assessment. This mirrors the real world where progress on major projects is continuously monitored, not just the end result. Employees are also unlikely to work in isolation.

It is apparent that much time can be wasted through mis-use of the Internet and in particular social networking sites. This may be detrimental to the academic performance of students. Nevertheless accepting that social networking on the Internet is not going to go away perhaps academics should embrace it. Perhaps we should better use the media that students use to communicate with each other to reach them. If they haven't been in class can we go looking for them on Facebook? As a shift towards a more blended form of teaching should we make better use of social software and social networking in an educational context?

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