Social Networking Use in Higher Education

Dr. Smita Garg

Ating Prinipal & Associate Professor
Digamber P.G. College, Dibai
Email: smitjuhi2966@gmail.com

Abstract

Web and Social networking technology like Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn is all around us, in all walk of life. It has become an essential daily routine of billions of people around the world. Social networking technology (SN) continuously influences the lives & thoughts of young adults and has changed the way they communicate and collaborate. Our universities & colleges can't be left untouched by this new age phenomenon, both in a positive as well as a negative way. Hedonistic activities like content consumption & gaming are the most apparent manifestation of social media use and to an extent it is responsible for decreased student interest in conventional education and a drop in academic performance, in extreme cases even drop-outs. On the other hand, social networks have created new opportunities to seek & assimilate knowledge in both formal and informal settings. Therefore, its apparent that the technology can also be used for educational purposes, as a facilitator and enhancer of learning, specifically for increasing awareness, enabling low-cost access, and reinforcing learning behavior by adopting elements of gamified learning.

This paper review tries to highlight some facets of the debate regarding use of social media technologies in higher education. The paper attempts to summarize the utility of social media as an online learning platform (LMS) and its impact on the learning processes and academic performance in the context of a typical young adult users' personality profile and learning style.

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Social networking Usage amongst Young Adults

Students & young adults use SNs mostly for socialization and entertainment purposes, some students also use it to increase their presence amongst their friend circle and community. However, SN is also used by them for increasing professional awareness, connecting with like-minded researchers, and for collaborative learning by creating a supportive network or a personal learning network (PLN). Through these self-governed PLNs, students can connect with likeminded students and exchange knowledge in an informal way. Very often these virtual PLNs can run across institutional or even country boundaries. SNs are mostly used for informal learning & research purposes and in those settings SNs become a key channel of knowledge diffusion.

At a more basic level, the social media interactions help students feel more connected to the college, which may subsequently decrease the dropout likelihood. Social networks contribute to formation of and reinforcement of a unique "university culture", which plays a prominent role in improving educational outcomes. In large university, SNs are a channel for mass communication - for instance to obtain pastoral & administrative guidance from faculty and older students. Some students also view SNs as an important tool to enhance language skills. Students active on SNs tend to make better use of computer aided online learning and e-learning environments.

Social Networking Usage in higher education Institutes

Research also suggests that in professional settings that require significant cross-functional collaboration, such as health care, usage of SNs for collaboration during training can be corelated well with positive professional outcomes. In the modern workplace, learning through asking questions, observing coworkers, and other uncoordinated and independent learning activities typically accounts for 80% of an individual's knowledge about this/her job. In these settings social component of learning is just as important as the cognitive component, and if these two elements can reinforce each other by adopting SN based pedagogy in higher education institutes, we can create a more efficient educational environment and increase educational performance & skills readiness of our students.

Academic performance is a function of attention span, time management skills, student characteristics and academic competence. On their part, students are keen on using social networks within their study hours even if that is considered inefficient. To the extent that SNs takes away study time and introduce distractions during the study time, SN usage can negatively influence students' academic performance. Conversely some research also indicates that college students who experience difficulties during their studies may use social networks to gain support. As the formal and informal learning ranges along a continuum of learning, it may be difficult to observe & measure the impact of SNs narrowly through the lens of formal educational constructs such as grade attainment. A comprehensive measure of success of SN adoption for education

purposes should include measures like increased interaction & participation in course discussions, learning oucomes adjacent to extended from the formally defined curriculum and application of the attained knowledge & skills beyond the context of the classroom. Although there are conflicting perspectives about correlation of SN usage and positive academic performance, there is a compelling evidence for SNs contribution in communication and collaboration among students. And ultimately learning is conversational in nature including dialogue and shared activity.

There has been significant proliferation of online MOOCs, where educators promote online version of their traditional courses. Many of these MOOCs have become successful because educators have taken advantage of "social nature" of these online learning platforms to improve communication and cooperation with their students and improving the students' participation and successfully expanded the learning process well beyond the classroom. Such platforms not only create a flexible, inclusive and creative learning environment (LMS), but it also encourages greater self-directed and active learning process.

LMS is another aspect for leveraging social networking technology in education, an LMS system could use SN technologies to generate useful data analysis for both educators and learners. An LMS that incorporates SN like features can become a dynamic tool to support educational co-operation between students and faculty to increase learning interest and to easily and accurately track understanding of the teaching concepts. A well implemented LMS enables evolution of an educator's role into facilitator and the students' role as producers and not just consumers of educational information, and as an outlet for thinking about class topics beyond the classroom. Educators can involve students in critical engagement via self-reflection, expression social interaction and reflective dialogue, instead of letting them simply passively receive teacher-generated content. By reading each other's opinions & analysis, the student the students feel they are an important part of the classroom and that their needs and opinions matter, they develop a sense of togetherness, a commitment to their learning goals, the over-reliance on the instructor can be overcome a common knowledge base can be built, provides an avenue for prompt feedback and weak study skills can be efficiently monitored & supported. Most students like the blog & micro-blog like features of these evolved LMS as a learning tool particularly for formative purposes. Such evolved LMS serve not merely as a technology scaffold, but a pedagogical approach that encourages self-regulation, a shift towards more collaborative modes of inquiry, and a collective discovery of "wisdom of crowds". By merging formal & informal learning styles, it can help in creating a self-regulated learning environment. While self-regulation of SN enabled LMS can be achieved, forum moderation requires significant thoughtful and timely interventions from the instructor, because a laise faire forum tends to be superficial and does not lead to construction of knowledge.

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Pedagogical impact of Social Networking Usage

Social networks affect individual behavior of young people in many different ways, but it is not clear whether social network affect the cognitive ability and personality of the students positively or negatively. Some studies suggest that extroversion, self-esteem, narcissism, and neuroticism did is not sufficiently corelated to SN usage while others note that there is a robust association between increasing self-esteem and frequent use of Facebook. In a related study, it was found that SN users score better on cognitive skills such as verbal skills, memory utilization, spelling, recall accuracy and so on. Online search also positively affects reading efficiency and facts presentation, but poorer text comprehension. The behavioural pattern shift seems to depend on the activities on the SNs where online chatting and online games do not seem to help cognitive abilities or learning propensity and searching for information, reviewing and describing events seems to corelate positively with learning outcomes. Students today appear to have changed their learning style to inculcate multi-technology tools, multi-faceted search, and hopefully synthesis of knowledge from multiple sources, as well as active learning through virtual and simulated situations. Additionally, learning in the context of social networking has become self-motivated and autonomous.

Although almost all young adults use social networks in their personal lives but often for more "serious" issues such as education the propensity of usage is not as certain or as widespread, as many students chose more traditional ways to be informed. Many students need support and guidance to make the best possible use of social media to support their learning goals. Some students may be worried about the information overload or the added time constraints that SN technology may bring. Some educational institutions prohibit access to social networks during working hours due to fears that SN addiction has adverse effects on student performance. Many educators do not support social networking in academia as widely, openly or strongly as their students because SN is perceived to be more connected to entertainment than information. Similarly, many educators remain hesitant in trusting social networks and the new methods and the changes that it brings, they would need guidance as how to implement its effective use in the classroom. However, those who have managed to create an alignment between course activities and the SN styled open communication are seen as new rock stars of academia. The key is to find an effective way to benefit from SNs without being overwhelmed by it. Educators should use social networks to achieve greater levels of co-operation and teamwork amongst students and they should be encouraged to develop skills necessary for appropriate selection and application of social media tools to self-organize their own learning.

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