Preface

A ROLE FOR SOCIAL NETWORKS IN EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE

The incredible change that has come over the very nature of interpersonal interaction caused by the worldwide, whirlwind diffusion of social networks, is slowly being mapped by researchers, but it is very much a case of reality racing well ahead of our ability to understand it. The impact of, say, Facebook usage on the psychological make-up of users, their approach to social interaction, their ability to self-disclose and make public what would otherwise have been either private, or at least confidential, is enormous. The change is intrinsic and overwhelming, affecting many walks of life and impacting every aspect of society.

The social networking phenomenon that has totally underscored the values that fuel Web 2.0 continues to grow. With Facebook leading the way as a general social networking site, LinkedIn leading the business sites, and Twitter the instant messaging sites, and with other sites like “dating” site Badoo also in the main mix, and Google+ slowly gaining ground, along with YouTube getting something like 490 million users a month (YouTube, n.d.), there are very few countries where there is not a massive increase each year in their usage.

Taking Facebook, as the most popular social network in the world, and quoting Cosenza (2012), “With more than 845 million active users (Facebook) has established its leadership position in 126 out of 137 countries analyzed ... Europe is the largest continent (using) Facebook with 232 million users, North America has 222 million, Asia 219 million users.” According to Infographic Labs (n.d.), there are, midway through 2012, 845 million active monthly users, creating a network with a hundred billion connections, with 250 million photos uploaded daily. An average 20 minutes are spent per visit.

Social Networking Sites (SNS) create a self-disclosing environment that instigates a large number of ethical, social, and communicative questions, each of which has been the subject of a growing amount of literature. A huge percentage of active users are students of all ages.

This makes for an incredibly vast and persistent captive audience, and it was only going to be a matter of time before the predominantly social networks would be considered for a more formal inclusion in instruction.

The very nature of the use of social networking has been deeply analyzed by the literature. A number of issues can be mentioned in passing. An example would be the extent and form of self-disclosure (Vitak, 2012), more often than not in the form of photos, comments, and profile updates, that has a direct and positive impact on self-esteem (Gonzales & Hancock, 2011; Wilcox & Stephen, 2013). This also applies to the number of friends one has, along with self-disclosure itself (Kim & Lee, 2011).
Logically, privacy issues figure up front in the concerns with SNS. The concept of cyberstalking has become an essential consideration, even leading some countries to enact protective laws (Chik, 2008). A study on Facebook by Chaulk and Jones (2011) concluded that “Behaviors like o-ORI [Online Obsessive Relational Intrusion] or stalking ‘may,’ or certainly ‘can,’ occur using Facebook as a medium” (p. 251). However, there does seem to be an inclination towards self-preservation, with less self-disclosure being practiced by those who have a large number of Facebook friends, and therefore, there is no personal, actual relationship with all of them (Brandtzæg, Lüders, & Skjetne, 2010).

In the case of use of SNS in instruction, one important point that has been explored quite extensively is teacher-student interaction on social networks. Russo, Squelch, and Varnham (2010) suggest that school administrators should impose a limitation on the use of SNS by teachers, because excessive self-disclosure, or other disclosure about the school itself, could be detrimental to them and even lead to disciplinary procedure. Miller (2011) even goes so far as to say that “Students and teachers should be prohibited from interacting with each other or having access to one another’s social networking Web pages to both protect the student and to protect the teacher’s ability to speak freely on legal, adult, subjects” (p. 665).

On the other hand, and much more relevant to the premise this book wishes to address, Teclehaimanot and Hickman (2011) distinguish importantly between active behaviors on Facebook (e.g., commenting) or passive (e.g., viewing or reading). Finding passive behaviors more appropriate, the authors found that that type of interaction “Would allow teachers and students the opportunity to learn more about each other as people, which would allow for an improvement in student attitudes toward their teachers and the learning environment” (p. 27).

Helvie-Mason (2011) continues the advocacy by stating that “Facebook interactions can help foster a new sense of connection between the students and faculty members. Students viewing the personal life (or what elements of a personal life the faculty decides to share on his or her profile) may find a greater sense of immediacy with the instructor” (p. 68).

Academics do use SNS, particularly to interact with each other. Even as far back as 2010, Veletsianos, Aspioti, and Aspiotis (2010) found that “Academics’ participation in SNS is a complex human activity where personal and professional issues blend [with participants engaging on Twitter in] social grooming, identify building, networking, and assistance provision/requests” (p. 265).

Some of these points come into play when considering the instructional use of Social Networks and none can be ignored, for each element overlaps the other in ways that create a homogeneity that infuses the very nature of the phenomenon.

That there is definitely a move towards a more formalized application of SNS in educational practice cannot be denied. Handbooks are being drawn up by official or semi-official national institutions, urging us on in this, even if at times cautiously so. One such handbook published very recently is the Facebook Guide for Educators: A Tool for Teaching and Learning, by the UK’s education think tank, The Education Foundation (Fordham & Goodard, 2013). It is true that the guide was actually commissioned by Facebook itself, but since too many others have said the same, one cannot on that basis write off the very bold statement that “Facebook is a vital tool for teaching and learning in the 21st century and for making education more social. It is already being widely used in colleges and universities across the UK and globally, but it has the potential to be a game changer for teachers, schools and the classroom” (p. 2).
FACEBOOK AND OTHER SNS IN EDUCATION AND INSTRUCTION

When considering SNS within a formalized instructional process, and, for the time being, excluding the uses of such Web 2.0 stalwarts as blogs (e.g., Schirmer, 2011) and wikis (e.g., Hwang & Brummans, 2011, from the same source; and the two of them in one research paper, Grey, et al., 2011) that have been used quite extensively and for quite a long time in instruction, one must first consider that the very nature of most social networks is informal. True, this is within a structured mainframe that creates manageable compartments, but the inspiration behind the use and the motivation that drives users of the networks is one that is more often than not independent of any formal driving incentive. That is to say, Social Networks are used because users want to, rather than because they have to, or because someone suggests their use as part of a more structured virtual learning environment.

This does not mean that there are no social driving forces. It is quite clear that peer pressure and the need to conform to what has quickly become the norm (especially when it comes to Facebook) with young adults seeking a peer-to-peer relationship and teenagers looking for new friends (Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009) is a most definite spur to usage. However, there do not seem to be any urges or impositions from a higher authority to join what is essentially an individually chosen network.

Then again, there seem to be three main dimensions that motivate the joining of social networks: the information dimension, the friendship dimension, and the connection dimension (Bonds-Raacke & Raacke, 2011). The friendship and connection dimensions are in the main social, intended primarily to make and/or retain friendships.

On the face of it, at least, the indications are that the general use of social networking is, by parts of its very nature (possibly excluding the information dimension) and motivational make-up, antithetical to pedagogical use.

Or is it? Can the elements to be found on social networking sites lend themselves to direct or indirect use by processes of instruction? Can the information-gathering dimension be brought to the fore and utilized in instructional processes?

A number of questions can be posed in this regard:

- Can instructional designers transpose sites that have such a strong motivational following to the delivery phase of instruction?
- Can the short message format on Twitter or Facebook status update convey condensed declarative and/or procedural information that can convey essential instructional content and/or methodological skills?
- Can the comment-board format on Facebook create a discussion stream that can be instigated and stimulated by curricular pedagogical content?
- Does the very diffused mobile access to the networks (Facebook itself has 425 million mobile users) provide added flexibility and afford possibility for learning on the go?
- Can pages and/or special interest groups be created that can be appended to the delivery of online or face-to-face content, with students joining the page, possibly voluntarily, for extra tuition purposes, if not for actual, direct mandatory content (in order not to undermine the voluntary nature that underscores the motivational drive in social networking)?
- Would such usage be considered a hijacking by institutionalized instruction of a purely recreational/social environment?
Would the use of social networking even be worth exploring, given that the basic architecture of the more popular of these networks is already present in most VLEs?

Can Facebook instructional pages be created that entertain, inform, socialize, and motivate students in the way that “normal,” informal profile pages do?

A number of recent studies have actually addressed a number of points raised in these questions.

THE LITERATURE

An observation-based study by Green and Bailey (2010) indicated that informal use of Facebook by students helped them with a number of aspects in their education, for example, sharing homework and answers, creating study group pages, and, peripherally, visiting pages created by clubs and organisations about student government, cheerleading, sport teams, etc. However, Green and Bailey found that most instructors were skeptical about formal and systematic use of Facebook for educational purposes.

Predictably, a small-scale study by Baran (2010) showed that if Facebook is formally used within an instructional, course-based environment, not all students were ready to embrace the use of social networking tools in formal teaching, learning, and assessment. A clarification of this is that “The student-student dimension may be more important than the student-content and student-teacher dimensions” (p. 148) – re-emphasizing the informal peer-interaction environment that Facebook has created and which tends to defy modification.

From a group of 759 medical students at one university, only 25.5% reported using Facebook for reasons related to education and another 50.0% said they were open to doing so. But in this study, Gray, Annabell, and Kennedy (2010) did not find that there was a change in attitude towards studying through the use of Facebook user groups, even by those who reported using the social network for education-related work.

On the other hand, Pilgrim and Bledsoe (2011), in a position paper, propounded how young people “liking” pages set up on Facebook by educational organizations is a useful means of information gathering and can be utilized by educators to pass on resources. Educators themselves can tap information about and from organizations using the social network, giving them easier and quicker access to what they are after than if they sought it out in Websites, library databases, and journals.

The authors also bring up a very important point in the conclusion to their position paper, linking Facebook usage to self-directed learning. This aspect is touched upon quite extensively in this book.

A more recent study by Wang, Woo, Quek, Yang, and Liu (2012) has shown that Facebook can successfully (though with limitations) be used as a Learning Management System. Admittedly, the authors seem to imply that this is more a case of it being used as an LMS where the more formal systems are not available and that younger students seemed to be more amenable to it than older ones. Still, it has “Pedagogical, social, and technological affordances, which allow putting up announcements, sharing ideas and resources, and implementing online discussions” (p. 437), though there are technological limitations, for example in the use of certain file formats.

Interestingly, in an aside that corroborates their findings, Wang et al. seem to uphold the study by Jones, Blackey, Fitzgibbon, and Chew (2010), which was intended to explore the disruptive nature and opportunity of social networking for higher education, that students tended to be averse to mixing their social life with their learning. This seems to be a recurrent deterrent to the full use of SNS in formal education, but increasingly clever ways in which one can work around it can be found in this book.
In fact, Sue Greener and Harriet Grange’s study (2011) on the potential use of Facebook in Higher Education concludes that the social aspect of the SNS tends to win over any attempt to induce its use for educational purposes.

However, Towner and Lego Munoz (2011) found that though Facebook is primarily used for informal learning purposes by university students, 46% of the respondents in their test (about the use of Facebook for educational acquisition) used the social network for formal learning purposes.

The following uses suggested and researched by them are quite interesting and cover a large area of usage.

In the case of Informal Learning, they suggest, in order of importance, that it is used to (1) find other students in the course, (2) get contact information of classmates, (3) leave a message on a student’s wall about a class, (4) find out what was missed in a course from another student, (5) set up a meeting with other students, (6) use FB chat to discuss something related to class, (7) talk about a class lecture, (8) obtain class notes from another student.

For Formal Learning, the suggestions, also in order of importance, are that Facebook is used to (1) ask students questions about a class assignment/project, (2) give help to other students about a class assignment/project, (3) collaborate with other students on a course project using Facebook, (4) ask students questions about an examination, (5) get help from study groups.

Formal usage of Facebook can be seen in Petrović et al.’s (2012) study of a group of students at the University of Belgrade, who “Were encouraged to create and moderate eco Facebook groups that centre on environmental issues” (p. 358) in the course Environmental Quality Systems. They found that 97.7% of students considered that this increased their environmental knowledge significantly; 90.9% were encouraged to change their environmental behavior patterns and participate in future environmental actions; and 94.7% were more motivated to participate in the process of learning. An expansion of this study can be read here.

A highly interesting Middle-Eastern experiment in the area of mathematics teaching was run by Daya’a and Daher (2011), in which a Facebook page was “set up” by a famous (but dead) mathematician (Al-Khwarizmi) in an attempt to “Move gradually from a social communication in Facebook to a more educational and content-directed discourse” (p. 652). The result was that social, cultural, and mathematical interactions were carried out by the friends on the page, and learning occurred. Other experiments of this type were also attempted by this group of dedicated researchers, and a description of the outcomes is being run in this book.

A triangulated study carried out in Cyprus among students from four universities showed that almost all students in the study were social networking literate, and most were amenable to using Facebook and other social networks to create and use special interest groups that would help them with their courses (Eteokle, Ktoridou, Stavrides, & Michaelidis, 2012).

What are some of the arguments in favor of using SNS as part of education?

Just to mention two from the recent literature: Agarwall (2011) is quite optimistic about the use of Social Media in education. He introduces his arguments about the facility of use of SNS with the following:

*Ease of use and intuitive interfaces of social media technologies make it convenient to use these technologies in learning and also for content management. It requires zero to minimal training for learners to begin using social media technologies. Furthermore [...] most individuals are already using social media technologies, and this makes blending social media technologies into a learning environment simple and rational.* (p. 44)
Since the very concept of the classroom has changed into one in which “It is a place where you start to build your career and make connections with people professionally and within the community” (p. 10), Barnes (2012) argues that since this is a Social Networking Classroom, then adding social networking tools to it transforms it into a worldwide learning experience. This is the sort of classroom that prepares students for the real world and professional life.

WAYS OF ASSIMILATION

One thing is pre-eminently clear while sifting through the literature on the subject, and that is that the meteoric growth of social networking is much faster than our ability to study its impacts. Most studies seem to be an on-the-run attempt to catch up with one aspect or another of the phenomenon. In fact, the Sociology of Technology’s dealings with Social Networking seem very much to be in the grips of a phenomenological science that is often being overtaken by developments. It is little wonder then, that, according to Baran (2010), there are more students interested in the social, as opposed to the teaching, dimensions of the likes of Facebook.

Given the ebb and flow of opinion and data in the research presented above, there does seem a persistence in the widespread attempts to find some way of, if not integrating, then definitely peripherally utilizing SNS in education contexts. However, in which way can Social Networks participate directly or indirectly in educational practice?

Let us consider briefly four possible ways, each less directly involved in course structure than the other. Many of these are represented in the different chapters to be found in this book. Some, of course, more than others.

1. **Integrated**: The utilization of social networking accounts as part of the architecture of the instructional design. This involves an acceptance by the students to suspend their intuitive approach to the social network they normally use as a matter of daily rote and accommodate the use being made of that SN by the course they are following. Once student acceptance—a sort of willing suspension of common practice—is gained, there are a number of ways in which social networking can be integrated. All cases (within this classification) involve some sort of actual instruction, or at least the imparting of information, directly incorporated in the SN pages created especially as part of course delivery. Problems with privacy issues need to be overcome or bypassed by the individuals carrying out the instruction, the institutions that support the individuals, and the countries where these institutions are. Hierarchically, personal ethical conduct, institutional regulations and countrywide laws come extensively into play in this case.

2. **Appended**: Social network pages added onto an existing course structure as a continuation of the delivery, or as a way for students to reinforce, discuss, and problematize the learning gained through the formal course itself. This is normally done primarily through the comment board function of social networks. There is less need for student suspension of common practice for this approach, since the usage is peripheral and more in line with what normally happens in social network interaction, even though its usage would most probably be expected of registered students since the pages are set up by course administrators, and students would feel that they are “missing out” if they do not participate.
3. **Supportive:** A less strict version of (2) in which either course administrators or students themselves either create dedicated accounts, or make use of existing ones to support the learning from the formal course itself. The role is similar to appended social network use, but not as expected to happen, although obviously encouraged. The incidental nature of the usage puts this approach more in line with rote usage of social networks and therefore more likely to be easily accepted by participating students. In fact, this has become quite common practice as a method of information interchange, even though participation is likely to be less frequent than in the case of (2) since no official postings are made by course administrators.

4. **Random:** Completely incidental reference to course content, delivery, and imparted information in the course of normal social networking usage on individual student and/or instructor accounts. Since this is not really even peripherally a part of course work, it can only be mentioned here because it does contribute to student and/or instructor communication about delivery, content, project work, assignments, etc. It is difficult to map incidence, even though feedback can be obtained through backtracking information sources about individual items that are not officially posted and which, yet, surface and are widespread.

There are most definitely other ways in which social networks can be utilized within course design, but these four seem to cover most bases.

The need to utilize SNS in educational practice is particularly urgent because of the inevitable cognitive change that immersed usage in social media is bringing about in learners (Mallia, 2009) and because most models of learning utilized in so many countries around the world have not yet caught up with this change.

**THE SOCIAL CLASSROOM**

First of all, a tiny bit of personal history in relation to how *The Social Classroom* came to be:

This book owes its origins to the International Conference on Information Communication Technologies in Education (ICICTE) that is held annually on a Greek island, and which is an excellent scientific and social forum of a high academic standard that instigates a lot of discussion among its international participants and stimulates ideas that, on fruition, serve educational communities worldwide. I have been, in turn, a participant, a presenter, a workshop leader, a facilitator, and part of the organizational team of this conference, and have found it to be a perfect meeting place for the instigation of research projects that often lead to actual, instructional application.

The topic of this book was tentatively offered up for discussion by myself in a workshop in the 2010 edition of ICICTE. The discussion was quite intense, and many wrote off the concept of SNS usage in education on the basis of the implications of the actual “social” aspect of the sites, which, they felt, precluded formal inclusion in education. Others took up the challenge, went home, and experimented with different usage of SNS in practice and came back the following year with papers reporting their experiments, collated in a session I facilitated. The innovative diversity and, at times, actual hands-on applications of the papers presented, extolling an area of scientific research that had not at that point been extensively explored, gave birth to the idea of this book, intended specifically to reflect that research or practice-based innovation.
That is why there are a mixed set of chapters in *The Social Classroom*. All have a solid academic basis, and in the main, there is original empirical research. A few present their arguments through the literature. Most apply the research to classroom situations, reporting back on what happened then.

Throughout this book there is evident the healthy curiosity of the researcher-practitioner, whose primary enthusiasm comes from doing, and whose motivation is the progress of the students in his or her charge. Understanding how this exciting new dimension of our social reality can be utilized in ways that can improve teaching and learning is at the basis of all that you are about to read here.

The variety is huge. As is to be expected, Facebook is the subject of the majority of chapters. Different countries and their varying cultures and approaches to the regulation of this multifaceted and often badly-understood area are also brought to play in a number of the chapters, each creating a model that helps us understand just what is going on, and, at times, what can go on given the right attitude, knowledge, and skills.

In this book, you will find five sections, each examining a different aspect of the research question posed here: formal and informal use of SNS in teaching and learning; understanding how one can use SNS for domain-specific teaching and learning; ethical, social, and psychological implications of SNS educational use; individual social networks and their use in instruction; and case studies of using individual SNS in teaching and learning.

In each case, there is a mixture of approaches: from detailed empirical studies to teacher-researchers examining and describing their own practice. The book also covers quite a large range of students, from schools to universities, because the intention is to be as across-the-board as possible, with the added implication that what might work at one level, or using one particular SNS, might be transferred to be used in others.

*The Social Classroom* is intended to fill a gap in the research in this area that has suddenly become very important in education and instruction. It joins a very few publications that explore the many ramifications that this area has, and which have made it a potential game-changer. This is because of the ready proliferation of SNS, the intrinsic motivational infrastructure that is part of their very nature, because there are never enough tools to help education at a time when the models created by social media are impinging themselves on the processing configuration of learners, and because educational practice cannot just sit still and expect to remain valid and effective when its clients have changed and it has not.

Gorđ Mallia  
*University of Malta, Msida, Malta*

**REFERENCES**


