Chapter 1

Encouraging Communication through the Use of Educational Social Media Tools

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ABSTRACT

Over the last decade, our society has embraced social networking and web-based and mobile technologies. In an attempt to stay current with social trends, educators have become increasingly interested in how best to harness social media tools to enhance their teaching practices. This paper will explore the use of social media tools, such as Edmodo and Glogster, with 30 Japanese high school exchange students in Sydney, Australia. Given that the classes were homogenous, the teachers’ biggest challenge was to create a classroom environment that encouraged students to use English rather than Japanese to communicate with one another. By using social media tools, students were given the opportunity to embrace and explore different technologies while creating a space to communicate with their peers and teachers in English. This article will discuss the types of activities and tasks employed and student and teacher feedback. New technologies continue to emerge and evolve, shaping how our society communicates, works and learns. Educators, in particular, have attempted to harness various aspects of technology to enhance teaching and learning. Given that social networking and web-based and mobile technologies have become an integral part of young people’s everyday lives, educators have become increasingly aware of the need to incorporate these social media tools in the learning process. The impetus for the action research presented in this paper was born from a desire to promote English language communication through introducing social media tools, such as Edmodo and Glogster. The aim was to explore how a variety of tasks and activities are employed and received by both students and teachers.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-1882-2.ch001
SOCIAL NETWORKING

The emergence and evolution of the World Wide Web, first as Web 1.0 and then as Web 2.0, has forever changed how societies access information and communicate. The introduction of Web 2.0, or the ‘Social Web’ as it is often referred, has made it much easier for content to be generated and published by users (Kamel Boulos & Wheeler, 2007). These changes in technology have allowed for new approaches to teaching and learning, allowing for new ways to communicate and acquire information. Gunawardena, Hermans, Sanchez, Richmond, Bohley and Tuttle (2009, p. 4) argue that:

The changes in technologies are driving changes in human behaviour, interactions, and knowledge acquisition. The paradigms for learning have already evolved beyond traditional classroom models to synchronous and asynchronous, interactive, and collaborative learning, which is further extended by Web 2.0 tools and social networking.

For the purpose of this paper, social networking is defined as ‘the practice of expanding knowledge by making connections with individuals of similar interests’ (Gunawardena et al., 2009). Characteristics of social networking, such as interaction, sharing, and contribution, seem to befit the goals of teaching and learning language as we attempt to encourage the co-construction of knowledge. Comas-Quinn, Mardomingo and Valentine (2009) argue that sharing is an important activity in the co-construction of knowledge and that the ‘proliferation of user-generated content, free sites and software seems to point to a previously untapped human desire for sharing’ (p. 98). Therefore, language students can tap into this desire to share by using the target language to negotiate meaning with their classmates while also building an online learning community.

Online Learning Communities

There is a growing field of research focusing on the use of microblogging, or social media tools such as Twitter and Facebook. There is a belief among a number of researchers that these tools can foster and build a sense of community within and outside the classroom (Gannon-Leary & Fontainha, 2007; Gunawardena et al., 2009; Lai, 2015; Lomika & Lord, 2012; Newgarden, 2009). However, Salmon et al. (2015) argue that while community ‘belonging’ is desirable in an online learning community, there is limited research to suggest that it is either aspired to or achieved in these learning environments. The power of social networking, however, ‘lies in their potential to extend learning beyond the boundaries of the classroom community’ (Newgarden, 2009). These online communities can provide a platform to share, collaborate and reflect.

With the emergence of social networking tools, online learning communities allow language learners to share their common interest of improving their language skills by interacting with one another online. Through specifically designed educational social networking tools, such as Edmodo and Glogster, language learners can not only negotiate meaning and engage in the target language through discussions but can share resources and information. While research on the use of Edmodo and Glogster in language classrooms is limited, several studies in mainstream classrooms suggest that these tools provide engagement, interaction and the opportunity to ‘develop’ one’s voice (Thibaut, 2015; Carroll & Edwards, 2012). Thibaut (2015) investigated how a year 6 class in an independent school in Sydney used Edmodo as an educational tool. They found that students were able to ‘share their ideas, knowledge and creations by
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