A Framework for Knowledge Management in Higher Education Using Social Networking

Vladlena Benson, Kingston Business School, UK
Stephanie Morgan, Kingston Business School, UK
Hemamali Tennakoon, Kingston Business School, UK

ABSTRACT

Recent years show an increase in the popularity of online social networking among the younger generation that opens up possibilities for educators to use it as a higher education platform. The focus of this paper is to highlight some open research questions in the context of knowledge management in higher education with the use of online social networking. Analysis of current research reveals that social networking sites are a useful tool in teaching and learning as well as in employability and career management of students. However, research is limited in terms of the applicability of social networking sites in other parts of the student life cycle including lifelong learning. The possibility of using online social networking in knowledge management, particularly in the area of knowledge accumulation and knowledge sharing is yet to be properly addressed by researchers. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to draw attention to some implications of exploiting knowledge resources with online social networking for HE institutions.

Keywords: Educational Technology, Employability, Knowledge Management, Online Social Networking, Social Capital, Student Lifecycle

1. BACKGROUND

Among the latest web trends, online social networking is rapidly gaining popularity, especially among the younger generation. Survey results (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010) from US for instance reveal that by September 2009, 73% of online American teens between the ages of 12-17 are using social networking sites, an 8% increase from year 2008. This is especially relevant to younger individuals who are increasingly comfortable with information and communication technology, familiar with a wide variety of communication and computing devices and lead an active social life enriched by means of online social networking services (Prensky, 2009). So high is the proliferation of online social network activity amongst young people that many academics find the possibility of connecting students online through social networking services rather promising. Learning and teaching have naturally attracted greater attention from academics. There have even been suggestions of an emergence of a new Web 2.0 pedagogy which harnesses net-
working capabilities (Alexander, 2008). Using social technologies and media allows learners to communicate and collaborate across national and cultural boundaries, generate academic content, and become active participants and contribute to the learning process. As student life is multifaceted a number of areas of social networking applications have been explored in recent literature (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). Student recruitment and marketing, alumni relations and entrepreneurship are only a few areas where higher education institutions endeavour to harness the benefits of social networking connectivity (Benson, Filippaios, & Morgan, 2010). Knowledge generation and meaningful exploitation of resources embedded in relationships in HE settings has attracted significant attention (Alexander, 2008). However, the question of the changing nature of knowledge in the age of social networking (Prensky, 2009) and mass connectivity remains yet to be answered. Through a discussion of a range of literature and a potential lifecycle framework, we argue that our understanding of how knowledge is accumulated throughout the learning process can be improved by the conscious use of a knowledge management framework that ‘extends the classroom’ both before joining HE and after graduation.

Taking into consideration the possibility of using online social networking in knowledge management in higher education, this paper endeavours to address the following. Followed by the introduction to the concept of social networking, the discussion turns towards the exiting definitions of knowledge, leading to the question of what and how we are attempting to accumulate, manage and share knowledge resources through applications of online social networking in Higher Education. Then we consider the stages in a student lifecycle and relates competencies and skills essential at each stage. Subsequent sections of the paper propose a framework for knowledge management through social networking in HE settings and beyond. The final section presents some practical implications of applications of social networks in student lifecycle and summaries some open questions for further research.

2. THE MEANING OF ‘KNOWLEDGE’

The term ‘knowledge’ has attracted research attention from a variety of disciplines. The concept has a history dating back to the time of the Greek philosophers. Questions such as ‘what do we know?’, ‘what can be known?’, and ‘what does it mean to say that someone knows something?’ discussed in philosophical literature (Fagin, Halpern, Moses, & Vardi, 2003) remain topical and perhaps unanswered by the contemporary research. Understanding the meaning of ‘knowledge’ is an important process, as the multifaceted, intangible nature of ‘knowledge’ leads to a wide range of definitions.

Wilson defines knowledge as ‘what a person knows’ and states that, ‘knowledge involves the mental processes of comprehension, understanding and learning that go on in the mind and only in the mind’ (Wilson, 2002). A similar definition was introduced by Chen as an ‘intangible asset’ or ‘intellectual capital’ (IC) which is ‘an activity not a commodity’ (Chen, 2008). This definition confirms Wilson’s view that knowledge is more of a mental process rather than a physical object that could be ‘managed’. Nonaka and Takeuchi argue in their highly acclaimed paper ‘The Knowledge-Creating Company’ that knowledge is the result of interaction between ‘explicit’ and ‘tacit’ knowledge (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). This takes us a step forward from the previous definitions by including both the tangible and intangible elements of knowledge. However, this definition has been criticised by scholars (Gourlay, 2006) as a misleading statement since in a previous article Nonaka has defined knowledge as a “personal belief” (Nonaka, 1994). Klein calls it a “true, warranted belief” (Klein, 1998) while Dewey and Bentley describe it as “vague words” which we are bound to use at times (Dewey & Bentley, 1949). ‘Processed information’ is the term Myers uses to define knowledge (Myers, 1996) and a broader description is given when they explain it as “information combined with experience, context, interpretation and reflection” or in other words, as a richer form of information.
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