Chapter 11

Educational Social Networks as a Means for Better Social Cohesion in Education

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ABSTRACT

In the chapter, the authors argue whether social networks can contribute to the enhanced sense of community in an educational environment. Several studies show that the creation of a proper social environment with proper social integration has important positive effects on the students’ success in learning environments. In the chapter, the results of the study performed at the University of Maribor are presented, which show that social networks can enhance social cohesion, improve communication between members, and contribute to goal achievement of a social group.

INTRODUCTION

There is no doubt that social networks have changed the way we communicate today, and in this chapter we discuss if they are effective in decreasing social and psychological distance in (on-line) education and in contributing to the benefits of social cohesion in education. Our research focused on how social relations in the classroom are portrayed on the Internet in social networks and how does it affect success in education.

Several distance education models are presently in use, such as broadcast television, video and audio teleconferencing, and asynchronous learning networks—ALNs (Rovai, 2002). Learners use computers and communications technologies
in ALNs to work with remote learning resources, including online content, as well as instructors, and other learners, but without the requirement to be online at the same time. Arguably, the most common ALN communication tool is the World Wide Web used in conjunction with e-learning software such as Blackboard or WebCT, providing student and instructor electronic access to course materials, grades, activities, and communication options such as discussion boards, email, and chat rooms (Rovai, 2002). But there is still no holistic approach to building social cohesion between students in online courses, at least no software uses the benefits of building social cohesion over an educational social network with the possibility for the learner to design his or her own educational profile.

Studies show that dropout rates are often 10 to 20 percentage points higher in distance education courses than in traditional courses, although there are significant variations among institutions (Carr, 2000). The physical separation of students in programs offered at a distance may also contribute to higher dropout rates. Such separation has a tendency to reduce the sense of community, giving rise to feelings of disconnection (Kerka, 1996), isolation, distraction, and lack of personal attention (Besser & Donahue, 1996) which could affect student persistence in distance education courses or programs. Tinto (Tinto, 1993) emphasized the importance of community in reducing dropouts when he theorized that students will increase their levels of satisfaction and the likelihood of persisting in a college program if they feel involved and develop relationships with other members of the learning community. The importance of community is supported by empirical research. Wehlage, Rutter and Smith (Wehlage, Rutter & Smith, 1989) found that traditional schools with exemplary dropout-prevention programs devoted considerable attention to overcoming the barriers that prevented students from connecting with the school and to developing a sense of belonging, membership, and engagement. The key finding of their report is that effective schools provide students with a supportive community.

Within the field of education social networks can enhance social cohesion, improve communication between members and contribute to goal achievement of a social group (in our case group of students with the common goal of similar interests in the field of study and successful conclusion of an educational course). We believe that engaging in an educational social network would be a positive addition to all other forms of online collaboration because it would contribute to social cohesion between students, encourage innovation, and enhance the effectiveness of learning and searching for information, linked to education. The other side of benefits would be also for the outside student social groups as research and development sections to be more easily linked to research in education.

The Study

Participants of this study were drawn from the Faculty of Electrical Engineering and Computer