Using Social Networks Communication Platform for Promoting Student-Initiated Holistic Development Among Students

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ABSTRACT

This article follows previous research works on the possibility of applying online social networks for educational purposes, and mainly focuses on how Facebook is being used as a platform to communicate among students of a student development project run by a local tertiary institute in Hong Kong which aimed to facilitate promotion and foster participation and interaction. The study takes on the perspectives from 7 student coaches and evaluate on the positive achievement as well as difficulties in promoting self-initiated holistic development via Facebook from 2011 to 2013. The study shows that instant interaction between participants and student coaches via Facebook leads to faster and more effective information circulation compared to traditional communication channels such as email, posters or bulletins. However, the lack of proactive discussions initiated by participants themselves, and the difficulties in establishing and maintaining active interactions between coaches and participants had been observed. Such passive practice by participants has hindered the effectiveness of fostering self-initiated holistic development.

Keywords: E-learning Platforms, Facebook, Learning Support, Social Networks, Student Coaches, Student Holistic Development, Virtual Communication

INTRODUCTION: USING ONLINE SOCIAL NETWORK AS NEW LEARNING SUPPORT

Under the new era of internet and cyber societies, online social networking has fast become as a popular mode of virtual communication which has fundamentally transformed the ways people interact with each other. Individuals are increasingly inclined to develop social relationships via popular virtual social networking websites or applications, first through Xanga and MySpace, and now via Facebook and Twitter. These websites or virtual spaces encourage users to share and publish selected
personal information which permits others to know about themselves.

In addition, people can use these platforms to establish and also maintain close relationships with their real-life friends, colleagues, classmates and family members. Such engagement to keep existing and establish new relationships via virtual communities leads to an ever-expanding sharing culture which allows people to access infinite amount of information from various sources for different purposes (Wasko & Faraj, 2005). In particular, many popular online social networking websites have been established, occupied and run by tertiary students at their leisure time (Madge, Meek, Wellens, & Hooley, 2009; Subrahmanyam, Reich, Waechter, & Espinoza, 2008).

Some depict the teenage nowadays in metropolitan cities as the Generation Media, alias ‘Generation M’, who is media-savvy and possess technological know-how and rely heavily on multimedia in their daily lifestyle (Roberts & Foehr, 2005; Vie, 2008). They do not treat computers and the Internet as a separate part from their everyday lives; rather it is part of it (Oblinger, 2003). Palfrey and Gasser (2008) suggest the concept of “digital natives” and describes the new generation as “born digital”. Although their arguments may have over-generalised the impact of internet technologies, and ignored the effect of housing or school locations, access, family background in effecting their online habits (Bennett, S., & Maton, K., 2010; Corrin, L., Lockyer, L., & Bennett, S., 2010; Hargittai, 2010; Jones, 2010; Jones & Cross, 2009; Kennedy et al., 2008), they are convincing in pointing out that the ‘Generation M’ in general have been literate in multi-media technology during their early learning experience, thus needs a new, creative way of teaching and learning.

Earlier research pays more attention to utilising informational technology as supplement of traditional academic learning strategies such as literacy and writing skills (DeVoss & Porter, 2006; Hart-Davidson, Cushman, Grabill, DeVoss, & Porter, 2005; Vie, 2008; Yancey, 2004). However, some see the early mastery of information technology skills and habit of using online social networking among teenagers as a breakthrough that can reach new terrains of students’ life. Besides offering users to make new friends and play online games, these networks allow teachers and school counsellors a new way to maintain contact with the students off the normal class hours. More importantly, young people’s online social behaviour may not necessarily be negative; in fact, research illustrates that their engagement can bring physical and psychological well-being (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Steinfield, Ellison, & Lampe, 2008). That means if we can look carefully into the different learning styles and expectations of our “net generation” (Williams & Chinn, 2009), and can utilise a social system effectively between individuals (both students and teaching staff) who have a shared academic context (Hwang, Kessler, & Francesco, 2004), the rapid growth and prevalence of online social networks can become a useful educational tool that can foster communication, interaction and collaborations between students, teachers, counsellors and curriculum planners.

Many scholars have studied the emerging impact of online social network among the younger generation and both its positive or negative impact on learning outcome after the millennium (Cheung, Chiu and Lee, 2011; Cho, Gay, Davidson & Ingraffea, 2007; DeVoss & Porter, 2006; DeVoss & Rosati, 2002; Perkal, 2008; Vie, 2008; Yu, Tian, Vogel & Kwok, 2010). In particular, in the light of the immense popularity of Facebook among teenagers in secondary schools and tertiary institutes or the Generation M to communicate and interact with peers, educators and even strangers (Bugeja, 2006; Capriccioso, 2006), it is meaningful to unearth its potential as a means of communication that can trigger learning interest among students. Some also recommend Facebook as an interactive platform for informal learning experience (Madge, Meek, Wellens & Hooley, 2009) and supportive services such as peer coaching (Parker, Hall & Kram, 2008).

Popularity of online social media also allow researchers to look into the development...
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