Social Networks in University Classrooms: An Experience of Teaching and Learning with Pre-Service Teachers through Facebook

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ABSTRACT

The use of social networks is an increasingly common practice in university education. This study describes an experiment carried out with a group of pre-service teachers from a Spanish University in which Facebook was employed as a resource to develop the teaching and learning process. Specifically, it was applied as a strategy designed to improve relations among the students in the classroom. In-depth interviews were held with twenty students and their teacher to analyse the influence of this emerging technology on knowledge building and the establishing of closer links among students and between students and teachers. The results acknowledge the value of this resource, both for the teacher and the students themselves, in the following areas: classroom climate, teaching-learning process, virtual tutoring, foreign language practice and digital competence acquisition. In the final section of the article, we put forward questions and issues for future research.

Keywords: Higher Education, Online Pedagogy, Social Networks, Student Teachers, Students

INTRODUCTION

Information and communications technologies (ICTs) have become an important and inseparable part of daily life. Among them, the Internet has brought about a revolution in our society (Castells, 2002; 2006). Social networks in particular are one of the main aspects that have grown in popularity and led millions of young people worldwide to become increasingly internet dependent (Wodzicki, Schwämmlein, and Moskaliuk, 2012). According to the ONTSI (2011), in Spain most social networking takes place on a daily basis. Young people between 18 and 34 are the most avid users of these networks. Likewise, the Centre for Children in Andalusia observed in a 2010 Report on ICT use and activities among girls and boys in Andalusia that 92% of respondents use the computer to access internet and 89.1% use it to

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chat via instant messaging (social networks), while 58.8% used it for this purpose every day, or most days.

This fact exerts a powerful influence in the educational sphere. Siemens and Weller (2011) argued that the Internet has brought about a change in the traditional relationships that existed in education, since tasks such as searching for information and knowledge, previously the domain of teachers, are currently available to students. In doing so, internet and social networks in particular become a perfect vehicle to reach those people who, for various reasons, are unable to attend school regularly. The most important thing is that a good information tool should be able to end the teacher’s monopoly as the main source of knowledge.

Nowadays, the application of social networks in the academic field of higher education is a reality (Mendiguren, Meso and Perez, 2012). Social networks are prompting a rethink of the traditional teaching model consisting of lectures as the only strategy, with the student treated as a mere spectator in the teaching-learning process. At present, Higher Education and European Higher Education mostly rely on a didactic researcher model where the student is the main actor in the teaching-learning process and the teacher is merely a guide to the use of different resources and strategies to access the knowledge (Pasadas, 2010). Within these resources nowadays, as we have seen, it is necessary to talk about the Internet and Web 2.0 as its constituents, and of social networking as a springboard to collaborative learning by students.

Several studies have brought to light various initiatives concerning the current use of social media as an educational tool which can also be considered a valuable alternative in the construction of knowledge and social learning (Dziuban, et. al, 2013; Meso, Perez and Mendiguren, 2010b; Selwyn, 2012). In Higher Education, teaching using the Internet provides opportunities for students to achieve their learning development beyond what is acquired in the classroom (Betts, Kramer and Gaines, 2011; Eynon, 2005; Gao, 2013), even though there is little experience and not many teachers are using this type of education. In addition, university learning is shifting away from the reception and storage of data and is focusing more on promoting analysis, searching for and reprocessing information found on the network and shared with peers through it, and encouraging student autonomy by always taking into account the flexibility and adaptability of space, achieving directions and a different interaction between teachers and students in order to enable, facilitate and promote collaboration beyond the physical boundaries of the university and academic spheres to which they belong (Area 2000).

The rise of social media has also been a challenge for teaching in higher education, representing an advantage for students by encouraging dialogue between peers and promoting resources that foster collaboration and develop communication skills (Siemens and Weller, 2011, p. 157). However, it also means the beginning of the training for teachers, who have had to learn to distinguish between the advantages and disadvantages of social networks in order to make them a suitable educational resource for the classroom. Moreover, today’s students are experiencing a new form of interpersonal communication that encourages collaboration among peers and the emergence of stronger work and friendship-related relationships between them (Guiza, Salinas and Flores, 2011; Meso, Perez and Mendiguren, 2010a; 1998; Sotomayor, 2010). Thus, our students are learning a new way of establishing and nurturing relationships through a digital channel rather than the old approaches, which were based on face-to-face interaction (Moorman and Bowker, 2011). This new experience in establishing and maintaining interpersonal relationships can be applied in the field of higher education, using social networks as a teaching resource to enhance learning and the acquisition of our students’ basic skills (Cho and Kim, 2013; Davis III, et. al, 2012; Wodzicki, Schwämmlein and Moskaliuk, 2012).
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