Chapter 16
Using Social Networking to Enhance Sense of Community in E-Learning Courses

Steve Chi-Yin Yuen
The University of Southern Mississippi, USA

Harrison Hao Yang
State University of New York at Oswego, USA

ABSTRACT
This chapter provides an overview and development of sense of community and social networking; discusses the potential uses of social networking in education; and presents a case study that integrates social networking into two graduate courses for the purpose of building a sense of community, improving communications and interactions, and promoting student-centered collaboration. The construction of class social networking sites, the implementation of these networks, and their effects on the students’ learning experience are examined. In addition, an analysis of feedback from students on the value of social networking in learning is included.

INTRODUCTION
The rapid technological change and proliferation of information resources are lineaments of our contemporary society. Online information and communication are changing the way instructors and learners interact within the teaching/learning process. Online teaching and learning represents a new educational paradigm. The “anytime, anywhere” accessibility of e-learning courses provide students and teachers the opportunities to work at their own pace and at locations they are able to control (Berge, 1995; Edelson, 1998; Spiceland & Hawkins, 2002). Furthermore, as Richardson and Swan (2003) indicated, “[e-learning] allows students to reflect upon the materials and their responses before responding, unlike traditional classrooms” (p. 69). Currently, there are two main types of e-learning applications within higher education courses: (a) fully online applications in which teaching and learning activities take place entirely at an online computer-mediated communication (CMC) setting; (b) hybrid applications in which...
Using Social Networking to Enhance Sense of Community in E-Learning Courses

both traditional classroom instruction and online
CMC are blended (Yang & Liu, 2008). In either
online or hybrid applications, online learning con-
tent is typically provided by courseware authors/
instructors, structured into courses by a learning
management system (LMS), and consumed by
students. This approach is often driven by the
needs of the institution/corporation rather than
the individual learner.

While online and hybrid courses are expand-
ing and the numbers of participants are increas-
ing, questions are being raised on conventional
LMS based e-learning. For example, researchers
are asking how best to foster community among
learners and their instructors who are physically
separated from each other, as well as separated in
time (Palloff & Pratt, 1999; Rovai, 2002a, 2002b).
Such separation may increase social insecurities,
communication anxieties, and feelings of discon-
neectedness (Jonassen, 2000; Kerka, 1996). As a
result of such separations, Sherry (1996) stated
that “the student becomes autonomous and iso-
lated, procrastinates, and eventually drops out”
(¶ 27). Previous studies suggest that a sense of
community, which is related to connectedness and
learning, is essential for an e-learning course to
occur (Yang & Liu, 2008).

With the emerging Web 2.0 technologies,
more opportunities and possibilities to enhance
existing e-learning courses are provided. For
instance, social networks are collections of Web 2.0
technologies combined in a way that help build
online communities. Social networking sites are
on the rise globally and are developing rapidly as
technology changes with new mobile dimensions
and features. These sites are changing the ways
people use and engage each other utilizing the
Internet (Childnet International, 2008). Today’s
technology enhanced students have shown grow-
ing interest in social networking sites because of
the community, the content, and the activities in
which they can engage in the sites. Students can
share their profile information, find out what their
peers think about topics of interest, share music
and playlists, and exchange messages with friends.
Students use social networking sites to connect
daily or even hourly for social as well as educa-
tional activities. They get to know their classmates
through Facebook and share their lives with others
on MySpace. Students use other social networking
sites like RateMyProfessors and PickAProfessor
to learn about their professors and choose their
classes. In addition, they share their photos on
Flickr and their videos on YouTube (The New
Media Consortium, 2008).

Social networking sites are changing the social
fabric of colleges and universities. In its fifth
study of undergraduate students and information
technology, the EDUCAUSE Center for Applied
Research (ECAR) investigated the use of technol-
gy by undergraduate students in American col-
leges and universities. The ECAR Study of Under-
graduate Students and Information Technology,
2008 analyzed the Web-based survey responses
of over 27,000 freshmen and seniors at 90 four-
year institutions and eight two-year institutions,
as well as findings from focus group discussions.
The key findings of the Social Networking Sites
section of the study included:

- Over 85 percent of respondents reported
  using social networking sites. The striking
  change over the last two years was in how
  many respondents now use social network-
  ing sites on a daily basis, from 32.8 percent
  in 2006 to 58.8 percent in 2008.
- Facebook was the most commonly used so-
  cial networking site (SNS) (89.3% of SNS
  users), with MySpace as the second choice
  (48.3% of SNS users). Traditional college-
age respondents (18 to 24 years old) used
  Facebook more than MySpace. However,
  older respondents used MySpace more
  than Facebook.
- Over 55 percent of SNS users spent 5
  hours or less per week on SNSs, and about
Related Content

Developing New Literacies through Blended Learning: Challenges and Lessons Learned in Ontario, Canada
www.igi-global.com/article/developing-new-literacies-through-blended/55935?camid=4v1a

Learning Molecular Structures in a Tangible Augmented Reality Environment
www.igi-global.com/article/learning-molecular-structures-tangible-augmented/51624?camid=4v1a

Impacts of Forced Serious Game Play on Vulnerable Subgroups
Carrie Heeter, Yu-Hao Lee, Brian Magerko and Ben Medler (2013). Design, Utilization, and Analysis of Simulations and Game-Based Educational Worlds (pp. 158-176).
www.igi-global.com/chapter/impacts-forced-serious-game-play/75730?camid=4v1a

The Role of Institutions in Creating Student-Focused Virtual Learning Spaces with ePortfolio Systems
www.igi-global.com/chapter/role-institutions-creating-student-focused/56046?camid=4v1a