Chapter 11

Connected: Online Mentoring in Facebook for Final Year Digital Media Students

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ABSTRACT
This study explores the efficacy of open educational resources and online social network sites in linking digital media students with industry through an e-mentoring scheme, to enhance employment prospects and promote professional networking. It reports on the progress made from 2009 to 2010, within a postgraduate program at the University of Adelaide, Australia. Over one semester, eighteen students in 2009 and sixteen students in 2010 engaged with their peers and a group of mentors through an online forum within Facebook. Students were required to submit work-in-progress imagery online, after which, industry representatives would provide feedback and critiques, allowing students to generate embryonic professional connections with industry. Over the two years, students responded positively to the experience, citing professional networking and peer feedback as key outcomes. Industry representatives noted the interactive platform of the online group, and the ability to engage with potential employees as benefits of the scheme. The project expanded in 2011, through international collaboration with Penn State University in the United States.

INTRODUCTION
This research has been carried out to evaluate the effectiveness of online social network sites as tools for establishing networking opportunities for postgraduate design students with relevant professionals, including both recent graduates and industry leaders. The core objectives for the study were a) to determine the requirements and expectations of final year postgraduate design students as they prepared to enter the workforce, b) to establish the significance of mentoring in final year design education, c) to explore alternatives to traditional face-to-face mentoring, and d)
to generate an engaging and interactive online community linking design students with industry. In order to achieve these objectives it was crucial to first determine the motivation of the students involved in the project, including their educational background and intentions upon completion of their current studies.

Who Are the Students?

This study involved final year students enrolled in the Master of Design with Digital Media program at The University of Adelaide, Australia. The students come from a broad range of educational backgrounds, including Design Studies, Architecture and Visual Arts, and major in a concurrently wide range of design fields, such as architectural visualisation, animation, visual effects, web design and graphic design. The majority of students aim to move into the workforce, either locally, nationally or internationally, at the completion of the program, with a much smaller number intending to complete further study, either coursework or research based. Bearing this in mind, it was essential to give the students the opportunity to a) network with relevant design industries, and b) develop a professional presence, while they were still studying.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Mentoring has two basic functions in career development: instrumental and psychosocial. The first function, instrumental (or career enhancing), deals with job-related activities. Participants engaging as mentors in this function offer support, advice and information related to task, career or professional development. The second function, psychosocial (or interpersonal enhancement), has to do with polishing interpersonal work skills, reducing stress, talking about problems, discerning how one is perceived by one’s colleagues, and role modelling correct behaviour for the workforce (Knouse, 2001). Mentoring can also be defined as a process of shared learning and growth that promotes mutual benefit, interaction and support for both parties (Bierema and Merriam, 2002), and is becoming an increasingly important function for both entering the workforce and future career success (Knouse, 2001). The mentoring relationship is a two way process which potentially benefits both mentee and mentor as they learn from each other (Bierema and Merriam, 2002). Recently a range of online mentoring approaches have been adopted in order to overcome barriers to traditional face to face mentoring including lack of access due to geographical or professional isolation, and time constraints, the latter of which is of particular importance in the hectic, modern-day design industry.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Online Mentoring

Online mentoring is carried out using electronic forms of communication, and is otherwise referred to as telementoring, e-mentoring or virtual mentoring (Kasprisin, Boyle Single, Single, Muller, 2003). Asynchronous online mentoring is usually carried out by email, however recently synchronous methods of communication have been utilised more and more, including wikis, blogs, instant messaging, social network sites, online voice-to-voice networks, and video conference tools such as Skype, indicating that the internet and accompanying social software applications can provide a viable medium for enabling mentoring. Online mentoring is distinctive because it challenges the conventional wisdom that mentoring must be based on a personal, face-to-face relationship. It opens the possibility for relationships that cross boundaries of time, geography, gender and culture unlikely to happen with traditional mentoring relationships (Bierema and Merriam, 2002). The ability of the internet to overcome temporal and spatial barriers enables online or distance mentoring to have an unprejudiced quality that can be missing in face-to-face mentoring. Social software appears