Collaborative Learning for the Net Generation: Using Social Networks in an Undergraduate Course

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ABSTRACT

Educating learners is a challenging task for academics. Many challenges arise because of the unique learning preferences of today’s learners, known as the Net Generation, who have grown up with technology. For academic communities, these students provide an opportunity for Faculties to adapt and enhance the learning process. This paper explores the implementation of Web 2.0 technologies at an undergraduate level for an introductory business-driven technology course. These Web 2.0 technologies were selected specifically for their collaborative nature and ability to support large numbers of students. This paper summarises the experiences of undergraduate students in the context of group work and social networking within a computer supported collaborative learning environment. The findings are based on a questionnaire, completed by 890 first year students of their experiences. Through this questionnaire, the authors determine whether the students found the introduction of new learning and teaching tools to be effective. The findings of this paper indicate that group work can be significantly enhanced through the use of Web 2.0 technologies and social networks.

Keywords: Collaborative Learning, Computer Supported Collaborative Work, Group Work, Net Generation, Social Networking, Web 2.0

INTRODUCTION

“We are entering a world in which we all will have to acquire new knowledge and skills on an almost continuous basis.” (Brown & Adler, 2008)

The concept of collaborative learning includes the creation of understanding through group interaction, with a focus on social learning. Social learning focuses on the ‘how’ rather than the ‘what’ of education. Social learning emphasizes the ability of students to participate in study groups and transfer knowledge. There are clear benefits to a social learning environment that cannot go unnoticed; students can clarify uncertainties while taking hold of the material more easily by asking questions and acquiring different views from fellow students (Brown & Adler, 2008). Collaborative learning
has specific application potential for learners of the Net Generation who have a preference for group work and peer-to-peer learning. These students also have an affinity and aptitude for a variety of information technologies, especially social software such as social networks.

In order to create this type of social learning environment, various Social Networks can be used. For this case study, Facebook was selected as the Social Networking technology of choice.

The focus of this paper will be on the use of Facebook as a social networking tool to assist Information Systems (IS) learning in the Informatics 112 first year module of the University of Pretoria. The reason for electing to follow this approach is that the learning tools for this subject were outdated in terms of their effectiveness with regards to subject matter retention. The historical approach was based on the principle of passive engagement which was not proving effective in terms of the target audience. This audience can be classified as the “Net Generation”, “Generation Y” or “Millennials” (Carlson, 2000) and have unique learning preferences which will be discussed and elaborated on further in this paper. There is a growing body of evidence to support the use of Web 2.0 technologies as learning tools, and more specifically for collaborative learning. As such, the authors selected a social networking tool, Facebook, in an attempt to determine whether it could be effectively used for collaborative learning at an undergraduate level.

There are some issues of controlling the use of the technology that have represented itself in the researched literature that are associated with online communities and education. On the other hand, there are numerous opportunities that virtual communities hold for higher education, for example efficient means of communication and interaction and advertisement. Opportunities and threats associated with an online community like Facebook in the situation of higher education need to be addressed in order to determine if it is a practical way of facilitating IS learning and education (Mitrano, 2006).

A spokesman for Facebook expressed his contradicting view on this matter by stating that the use of Facebook during class is not very different from using other technological tools (Bugeja, 2006).

**STRUCTURE OF PAPER**

Firstly the authors explore some views from literature on collaborative learning, Web 2.0 technologies and the Net Generation. Secondly the research questions and methodology will be discussed and the background of teaching and learning in South Africa warrants a short paragraph. Thirdly, the main research question as it relates to the effectiveness of Facebook as a collaborative learning tool at an under-graduate level specifically for the Net Generation of learners will be discussed. The remainder of the paper is devoted to a discussion of the results of the questionnaire that the students completed and the findings from the study which also concludes the paper.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

**Collaborative Learning**

Learning can be defined as the acquisition and application of knowledge, skills and attitudes, resulting in a change in behaviour of the learner. Collaborative learning builds on the fact that most learning is of a social nature.

Collaborative learning is best described by Hilke (1990, p. 12) as “an organizational structure in which a group of students pursue academic goals through collaborative efforts. Students work together in small groups, draw on each other’s strengths and assist each other in completing the task.”

Collaborative learning has five basic elements according to Gabbert et al. (1986):

1. Positive goal interdependence which occurs when learners undertake a group task believing that they cannot succeed unless everyone in the group succeeds.
2. Face-to-face promotive interaction which occurs when a verbal interchange takes
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