Chapter 16
Online Education: A Unique Opportunity to Develop Online Communication Skills while Controlling Your Personal Brand

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ABSTRACT
Young people will have to change their names in order to escape their “cyber past,” prophesized Eric Schmidt (Google’s CEO) in August 2010. This provocative thought from the principal opponent of Facebook may be considered a strategic maneuver, but it also highlights the deep societal changes coming with the continuing development of social media. From the instructors’ perspective, people may wonder if online education could help students develop their communication skills in the era of web 2.0. But others may contend that a priority has to be given to the class content, not to another use of the media, which simply provides a new channel to enhance the learning experience. This chapter proposes a first step to reconcile the two perspectives and shows that improving students’ communication skills and awareness when teaching in an online environment can enhance student learning and help personal branding, i.e. developing the ability to package their skills and to showcase their distinctive attributes. To help demonstrate this, results from the authors’ courses are provided.

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INTRODUCTION
Developing Online Communication Skills, A “Must Do” in Education

In a society which has broadly been described as an Information Society (Beniger, 1986; Garnham, 2004; Webster, 2002) since the 80’s, or more recently as a Network Society (Barney, 2003), it should not be a stretch to posit that online communication is not only for geeky teachers or students, but addresses society at large. Moreover, with the dramatic growth of research engine capabilities and the emerging social media phenomenon, online communication skills are at stake. The necessity to educate this skill should not be underestimated, as we were reminded by Eric Schmidt (Google’s CEO) during the summer of 2010:

*I don’t believe society understands what happens when everything is available, knowable and recorded by everyone all the time. (...) we [Google] know roughly who you are, roughly what you care about, roughly who your friends are.”* He predicts, apparently seriously, that every young person one day will be entitled automatically to change his or her name on reaching adulthood in order to disown youthful hijinks stored on their friends’ social media sites (Google and the Search for the Future, 2010).

So the internet – and especially social media (Facebook, Twitter, Youtube, blogs, etc.) – can be seen as a threat to privacy as it may expose the “cyber past” of young adults, endangering their reputation and their future (Fernando, 2004). This statement should be extended to what one may call the “cyber present” of a person. In fact, many companies from various industries look at prospective employees’ pages on social media in order to assess potential candidates, and they can also sanction posts from current employees that involve the company.

Social media can be considered as a threat (the “dark side” of social media), but it is also a fantastic way to market one’s experience and skills, in other words, to develop a personal branding strategy (the “bright side” of social media). A personal brand is sometimes described as one’s most valuable asset (Alsop, 2004), and has been defined as “the process by which individuals and entrepreneurs differentiate themselves and stand out from the crowd by identifying and articulating their unique value proposition” (Schawbel, 2009). Needless to say, the exposure provided by the internet has been quickly identified as a determining promotion tool, notably because of its low cost and far reaching possibilities. In August 2009, LinkedIn declared that 40% of Fortune 100 companies use LinkedIn for recruiting solutions. But the phenomenon is not limited to LinkedIn, as the Social Media in Recruitment Conferences (www.socialmediainrecruitment.com, 2009, 2010, 2011) have recently shown. Thus, in the health industry, Cain, Scott & Smith (2010) show that American residency program directors from different generations use social media to aid future decisions for resident selection and hiring.

In the sport industry, one can observe similar phenomenon: social media is used for scouting promising athletes. It is also used by professional athletes to connect with their fans. For example, LeBron James was capable of getting more than 150,000 followers in less than 7 hours when opening his twitter account (becoming the most popular user of all times) and his Facebook page counts more than 4.7 million fans (results as of January 4, 2011). Nike, his sponsor, surely enjoys this type of exposure. But social media isn’t only used for recruitment purposes or for professional sport players’ popularity contests. Outside of the sport industry, Naslund (2010) shows that social media can be used within companies to improve creativity through discussion and to develop a sense of community. It can be used for internal branding purposes by both the company (empowerment of the employees, reinforcement of the...
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