A Study on the Use of Facebook in Informal Learning Contexts: What Are the Prospects for Formal Contexts?

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ABSTRACT

The main objective of this paper is to examine the results of an observational study on the use of Facebook by adolescents in an informal context. The authors describe the preliminary results of the research and analyze the significant variables that contribute to improve the current, important debate about the social network as a source of information and knowledge in the matching of learning in informal and formal contexts. The above analysis is the premise for the illustration of the potential and advantages that could follow from the use of social networking in everyday teaching. The core problem of the renewal of teaching today is in fact the centre of the debate on an integrated use of ICT in teaching-learning process as re-structuring factor of the action learning systems in formal settings with respect to the cognitive, affective, socio-relational and psycho-motor taxonomic components and implications.

Keywords: Action Learning Systems, Facebook, Formal Learning, Informal Learning, Personal Learning Environment ICT, Social Network, Teaching

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1. INTRODUCTION

Media use provides an important backdrop for the social, emotional, and cognitive development of youth, accounting for a large portion of their time (Roberts, Foehr, & Rideout, 2005). One type of online application that has grown rapidly in prevalence and popularity in recent years is social networking on the Internet. Social networking websites, such as Facebook, Twitter, Badoo, Linkedin, MySpace, are Internet communities that allow users to post profile information, such as a username and photograph, and to communicate with others in innovative ways such as sending public or private online messages or sharing photos online (Pempek, Yermolayeva, Calvert, 2009).

Because of this popularity, Social Networks have become not only a technological phenomenon but also a realm of interest for scholars exploring the processes and effects of computer-mediated communication and social networking. Nowadays, Social Networks are a relevant presence in the lives of adolescents, young adults, and adults (e.g., Lenhart & Madden, 2007; Wiley & Sisson, 2006), online interactions may influence developmental outcomes through peer feedback. In a content analysis of a personal webpages, user were often found to express themselves by posting information about their interests and their identity (Stern, 2004). Stern argues that the inclusion of various channels for reader feedback suggests that youth desire responses to the content posted, perhaps for self-validation or the formation of relationships. Valkenburg, Schouten, and Peter (2005) found that adolescents who experimented with identity through instant messaging had three primary reasons for doing so: to explore themselves through feedback from others, to compensate for social limitations of shyness, and to facilitate social relationships. Social networking sites provide an easy, accessible way to interact with peers and gather feedback. These opportunities may be particularly significant since peers are readily available online at almost any time, and the tools provided make communication easy to accomplish. Such contacts may foster the development of identity and intimate relationships, including friendships as well as romantic relationships.

Another relevant aspect of Facebook and Social network use is its role in education (Junco, 2012a). Roblyer, McDaniel, Webb, Herman, and Witty (2010) found that students did not report that they would feel their privacy was invaded by faculty encouraging educational uses of Facebook. Indeed, students in the Roblyer et al. (2010) study reported being more interested than faculty in using Facebook for educational purposes. A small-scale survey (Mazer, Murphy, & Simonds, 2007) found that students who experienced more instructor self-disclosure on Facebook reported more motivation and higher levels of learning. In contrast, research by Moran, Seaman, and Tinti-kane (2011) found that 77% of faculty engaged in personal uses of social media and 60% of faculty reported using social media in class. However, only 4% of faculty surveyed reported using Facebook in class. These data suggest that while students may feel comfortable with educational applications of Facebook, faculty are not ready to engage with them in such uses. Because of the viral speed with which the use of Facebook and other social networking technologies is growing among college-aged youth (Jones & Fox, 2009; Matney & Borland, 2009; Smith & Caruso, 2010), there is a great deal of popular and academic interest in the impact these technologies may have on student academic outcomes (Abramson, 2011; Kamenetz, 2011).

According to Kuh (2009), at least one of these outcomes student engagement is positively related to multiple desired outcomes of a college education (such as cognitive development, psychosocial development, self-esteem, locus of control, moral and ethical development, and persistence).

Junco (2012b) examined how college students felt about faculty use of Facebook. He found that Facebook activities are stronger predictors of student engagement, time spent preparing for class, and time spent in co-curricular activities than time spent on Facebook. This is congruent with research on general uses of
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