

Monograph “The Impact of Social Networks on Teaching and Learning”

ARTICLE

Using Social Networks for Pedagogical Practice in French Higher Education: Educator and Learner Perspectives*

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Abstract

Social networks were used within graduate eLearning French university courses over a three-year period (2007-2010) in order to explore and evaluate the relative advantages and challenges for the usage of such tools in higher education. All students involved were off-campus, and they were following curricula as part of a master's degree in Knowledge Management, Learning and eLearning within the Linguistics Department at Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3 University: http://www.univ-montp3.fr/metice/_masterprogaf/.

A collaborative learning environment and an online community of practice were established by the authors (who were also the tutors of the course), and students were invited to use them to discuss pedagogical issues relating to eLearning practice via a private eLearning Exchange Network (eLEN, Marsh & Panckhurst, 2007, Panckhurst & Marsh, 2008a, 2008b, 2009, 2010), using the social networking tool Ning (<http://www.ning.com>).

The aim of the three-year experiment was to place students at the core of the learning process and enable them to experience and reflect upon collaborative online learning while engaged in specific practical projects.

This article describes and analyses the latest case study (2009-2010) and compares it with the previous four case studies. In case study 5, which ran from October 2009 to March 2010, there was significant change in the learning design (identified in Panckhurst & Marsh, 2009). A social learning object focus (Weller, 2008) was adopted and the pedagogical design was centred on specific imposed projects rather than on individual-led discussions. The authors were keen to check whether this shift would compromise *diversity*, *autonomy*, *openness* and *interaction*, which are keywords associated with network usage (Downes, 2008). This article addresses these considerations and discusses how tutor/educator roles are currently shifting from control to subtle influence and/or initial shaping (Siemens, 2010). Student/learner roles have also changed perspective, as teacher-centric pedagogy is replaced by peer-group management, collaborative sharing, autonomy and student responsibility.

Keywords

eLearning, social networking, pedagogical/educational networks, communities of practice, social learning objects, collaborative/autonomous learning

Utilización de redes sociales para la práctica pedagógica en la enseñanza superior impartida en Francia: perspectivas del educador y del estudiante

Resumen

Con el objetivo de estudiar y evaluar las ventajas y desventajas relativas de la aplicación de redes sociales en la enseñanza superior, se exploró, en un período de tres años (2007-2010), el uso de estas herramientas en los cursos de posgrado de aprendizaje electrónico impartidos en Francia. Todos los estudiantes que participaron en el estudio vivían fuera del campus y seguían el plan de estudios del máster en Gestión del conocimiento, aprendizaje y aprendizaje electrónico del Departamento de Lingüística de la Universidad Paul-Valéry de Montpellier 3: http://www.univ-montp3.fr/metice/_masterprogaf/.

Las autoras (que también fueron las tutoras del curso) establecieron un entorno de aprendizaje en colaboración y una comunidad de práctica en línea, e invitaron a sus alumnos a utilizar estas herramientas para debatir cuestiones pedagógicas relacionadas con la práctica del aprendizaje electrónico utilizando una red privada de intercambio de aprendizaje electrónico (eLEN, Marsh et al., 2007; Panckhurst et al., 2008a, 2008b, 2009, 2010), mediante la herramienta de red social Ning (<http://www.ning.com>).

El objetivo del experimento, que se desarrolló durante tres años, fue situar a los estudiantes en el centro del proceso de aprendizaje, permitiéndoles experimentar y reflexionar sobre el aprendizaje colaborativo en línea, y al mismo tiempo participar en proyectos prácticos específicos.

Este artículo describe y analiza el último estudio de caso realizado (2009-2010) y lo compara con los cuatro estudios de caso anteriores. En el estudio de caso 5, que se llevó a cabo de octubre de 2009 a marzo de 2010, se produjo un cambio significativo en el diseño del aprendizaje (identificado en Panckhurst et al., 2009). Se prestó mayor atención al aprendizaje social (Weller, 2008), centrando el diseño pedagógico en proyectos asignados específicos y no en discusiones individuales. La finalidad de las autoras era comprobar si este cambio pondría en peligro la diversidad, la autonomía, la apertura y la interacción, que son palabras clave asociadas al uso de redes (Downes, 2008). Este artículo aborda estas consideraciones y analiza cómo se ha transformado el papel del tutor para pasar del control a la influencia sutil o a la configuración inicial (Siemens, 2010). El papel del estudiante también ha experimentado un cambio de perspectiva, ya que la pedagogía centrada en el profesor ha sido reemplazada por la gestión de un grupo de iguales, la puesta en común, la autonomía y la responsabilidad de cada alumno.

Palabras clave

aprendizaje electrónico, redes sociales, redes pedagógicas/educativas, comunidades de práctica, objetos de aprendizaje social, aprendizaje en colaboración / autónomo

1. Introduction¹

Five pilot studies using online social networks with second-year master's degree students at Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3 University were conducted between May 2007 and March 2010. The students were following curricula as part of a master's degree in the Linguistics Department of the university, entitled: "Knowledge Management, Learning and eLearning" (http://www.univ-montp3.fr/metice/_masterprogaf/). They were solely off-campus students, excluding a compulsory on-campus intensive week part way through the course. The underlying principle was to explore and evaluate the use, merits and challenges of social networking tools in higher education.

A collaborative learning environment and an online community of practice were established by the authors (who were also the tutors of the course) and students were invited to use them to discuss pedagogical issues relating to eLearning practice via a private eLearning Exchange Network (eLEN, Marsh & Panckhurst, 2007, Panckhurst & Marsh, 2008a, 2008b, 2009, 2010). The concept of an eLEN corresponds roughly to the idea of formatting social networks for pedagogical practice. Another term used is "educational networking". The social networking tool Ning² (<http://www.ning.com>) was used throughout the entire experiment.

The aim of the three-year process was to place students at the core of the learning process (Coombes et al., 2003) and enable them to experience and reflect upon collaborative online learning while engaged in specific practical projects.

In this article, the authors reflect upon their three-year long experience by comparing the pilot studies, which can be divided into two significant phases (eLEN1: case studies 1 to 4; eLEN2: case study 5). They also look at the reasons why academics choose (or could choose in the future) to use social networks for pedagogical practice in higher education. Other questions include: Do social networks differ from other tools that are currently used, such as forums, chats, etc.? If so, in what way(s)? If social networks are adopted in higher education, how should they be set up and used effectively? When used, do teacher/educator/tutor/student/learner roles change? If so, how?

2. Case Studies

2.1. Organisation (case studies 1 to 4)

The first four case studies were conducted from May 2007 to March 2009. Online forums in which students discussed pedagogical issues relating to eLearning practice were initiated via a private eLEN using Ning³. A student-centred two or three-phase period was adopted:

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1. The authors wish to thank their master's degree students, who, over the past three years, have provided a very enriching source of pedagogical research. The learners have taught the tutors a lot during this period!
 2. Ning was chosen for two reasons: first, it was not as widespread as other tools at the time, and, second, the interface was already translated into French (which was not the case for other social networking tools then), and this was a very important issue for our students.
 3. Details of these case studies appear in Marsh & Panckhurst (2007), Panckhurst & Marsh (2008a, 2008b, 2009).

- An initial getting-to-know-each-other phase (initiated and conducted by the tutors)
- A compulsory discussion thread phase, designed and led by individual students with peer group student participation
- A final third tutor-led phase (new in case study 4), inspired by key points identified in previous phase-2 discussions

2.2. Organisation (case study 5)

In case study 5 (October 2009-March 2010), there was significant change in the learning design (identified in Panckhurst & Marsh, 2009). A social learning object focus (Weller, 2008) was adopted for this eLEN (<http://reelgaf2010.ning.com/>), and a step was taken towards a new generation of eLearning Exchange Networks (eLEN2). The pedagogical design was centred on specific imposed projects (see Appendix 2 for an example) rather than on individual-led discussions.

Case study 5 was conducted as follows: instead of requesting students to initiate and moderate individual discussion threads, the group of 21 students was divided into five sub-groups of four to five members each, and imposed projects (the content of which the authors hoped would act as social learning object stimulation) were issued to each group over a two-month period, along with support information and links to websites. A precise time schedule (Appendix 1) including five deadlines per sub-group was stipulated and appropriate alerts were activated before each deadline. Sub-groups worked in private areas, which were only accessible to sub-group members, before submitting results to peers in the whole-group section. Whole-group work was also initiated in specific phases. The five groups kept to the deadlines and occasionally submitted work in advance, which, in the authors' experience, is a fairly rare occurrence in French higher education.

Tutors evaluated each piece of group work in March 2010, according to five criteria:

1. Organisation within sub-groups, tools used, internal communication efficiency, deadlines respected.
2. Quality of initial interactive synthesis posted to the whole-group.
3. Animation/participation of peer-forum members over a two-week period.
4. Final synthesis: tools used, documents produced.
5. Quality of final content.

2.3. Using Social Networks, or eLearning Exchange Networks (eLENs), in Higher Education

Analyses of the three case studies conducted in 2007-2008 strongly suggested that social networks, which sit outside the more formal institutional-based Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) or Learning Management Systems (LMSs), can benefit individual and collaborative learning, not only by allowing for a sense of freedom from the perceived constraints of academic VLEs/LMSs, but also by encouraging students to be more independent and take more responsibility for their own learning.

The online community of practice, supported by a social network tool, proved to be a powerful prop for students who were used to more traditional, directive, teacher-centric hand-holding pedagogy (Marsh & Panckhurst, 2007; Panckhurst & Marsh, 2008a, b, 2009).

Earlier successful eLearning Exchange Networks (eLEN) all included the following elements (see Panckhurst & Marsh 2008a, 2009 for full descriptive details):

- Sense of purpose
- Group cohesion
- A shift from tutor guidance to peer-group management
- Encouragement/promotion of learner responsibility/independence/autonomy
- Learners' sense of ownership
- Teaching staff/tutors letting go and taking the back seat

It was on the basis of this success that the fourth case study was initially set up. However, from the outset, it rapidly became evident that the group would not evolve and develop in the same way as the groups in the three previous case studies had, because a significant shift was noted in student attitude and perceptions of the place and value of social networks in their learning. The authors/tutors were wondering if social networks were simply becoming old-hat in the same way as electronic mail, forums, chats, blogs, etc. had seemingly become 'overridden' in pedagogical circles as a consequence of successive technological shifts. Over a relatively short period of two years, it was clear that the novelty of online interaction, as perceived originally by the students, had become mundane and commonplace with the increase in student private use of such tools like Facebook⁴ and Twitter⁵. Students clearly expected more from a social network being used as a tool for learning. So what was to be done?

Once the authors realised that the novelty value had perhaps worn off, it was too late to initiate a full overhaul of the course and redesign the structure, so it was maintained as such during case study 4. However, by the end of the session and while conducting critical research analysis, the authors decided that social learning objects that "facilitate conversation, and thus social interaction" (Weller, 2008) needed to be defined in this context and put into action through a new phase of eLearning Exchange Networks for the following case study. This article sets out some reasons why and includes suggestions of how the authors/tutors moved towards second generation eLearning Exchange Networks (eLEN2) through evolving both the pedagogical approach and the implementation, which in turn have had a major impact on both tutor/educator and student/learner roles and perspectives.

2.4 Case Study 5: Analysis and Results

2.4.1. Imposed structured social learning objects

Structure does not necessarily compromise learner autonomy

As specified earlier, in case study 5, the authors shifted away from peer-driven discussion thread moderation (which had set the trend for previous case studies) to structured role-play projects to be completed within a strict timeframe (see Appendices). The authors were initially concerned that this apparently dramatic shift in approach, with highly-structured projects and stringent timeframes,

4. <<http://www.facebook.com>>

5. <<http://twitter.com>>

would result in a loss of learner independence/autonomy. However, this was not so. The student outcome of project work dramatically exceeded the authors' expectations and, compared to previous case study work, was the best so far. Not only did the student sub-groups take immediate responsibility for their own learning by organising the work during an initial phase, but a subsequent phase designed around peer involvement through discussion threads was also very well moderated. And again, final pedagogical content and the wide variety of tools used were of top quality.

Students explained that the imposed topics meant that they saved organisational time, yet they still felt independent and were able to create:

"Firstly, the fact that the subject was imposed. It meant we worked on a subject we wouldn't necessarily have thought of, and it was also an important time-saver. We were able to start straight away without spending two or three days choosing a topic. And it also meant we at last had time to create more original and interactive work."

Another concern was that because a highly-structured role-play and timeframe had been set up, students would fall back on the teacher-centric pattern, regularly requesting help/advice from tutors. This turned out to not be the case either, perhaps for several reasons, including the notion of encouragement messages from tutors and clearly identified tutor-student trust:

Encouragement messages

"Concerning tutor presence, at the onset we weren't sure if we were heading in the right direction and we posted messages in the forum with summaries of our conversations. [One time], we were talking on Skype when we received a message from Debra to encourage us, which ended by saying that we could contact you if we had a problem. It was a short message, but sufficient in that it showed that we weren't alone but yet we maintained our autonomy and personally that reassured me, and I think we then continued to work more calmly."

Tutor-student trust

"The almost total autonomy we had for carrying out the activities on Ning was a plus. It helped us learn how to organise directives, to confront our ideas and our doubts, without having a teacher to guide us. I think that the tutors established a form of trust with the students and this was perceivable in the work we produced. Once again, this situation is comparable to what would be expected in a professional working environment."

2.4.2. Initial set-up: ice-breaking activities

Ice-breaking activities help form group cohesion and allow to gain student trust

During the one-week on-campus session, students clearly indicated that they felt that the tutors trusted them and had faith in their capacity to organise their work themselves and come up with final positive results. However, both trust and group cohesion do not simply happen. Student-centred learning has been advocated for years (Coombes et al., 2003), but it is not often realistically put into pedagogical practice. With eLearning, it is important to form group cohesion with ice-breaking

activities in order to gain student trust. Initial guidance and strict timeframes are important so that students then take responsibility for their own autonomous learning and achievement.

In case study 5, two different types of activities were introduced as ice-breakers before initiating the role-play projects. The first was a series of four discussion themes: 1) Getting to Know Each Other — this was the very first general-purpose informal discussion (7/10/09-12/10/09: 31 messages exchanged); 2) eLearning Experience – discussion on course content (8/10/09-13/10/09: 44 messages exchanged); 3) Communities of Practice: advantages and disadvantages (9/10/09-2/11/09: 44 messages exchanged); 4) Organisation Setup and Schedule of Semester (sent out on 10/10/09). Students were requested to respond if they were unavailable at given times (very important for workgroup organisation): 27 messages exchanged by 27/10/09. The second type of activity consisted of group work for one week on a specific subject: Texting and Secondary and Higher Education (available at: <http://www.univ-montp3.fr/sl/rachel/M2/SMS.htm>). The class group was divided into two large private sub-groups (12 students in group 1 and 13 students in group 2), and they had just one week to read, analyse, share, exchange and compile a summary on the topic, which was designed in a similar way to the subsequent role-plays. One of the two tutors guided the students throughout the week. The peer communication tools included electronic mail, synchronous (written, oral and sometimes video) chats, asynchronous forums, social networks, telephones, etc. As the tutor had specified that she wanted to have access to any communication taking place between students outside Ning and/or WebCT, one group decided to include audiovisual data (exchanged in Skype meetings) in the final hand-in document.

After completing the Texting and Education activity, the students submitted a summary, which was to be as attractive and interactive as possible. Each group used quite different and elaborate tools and software for their final presentation/summary, including: traditional word-processing documents, pdf and html documents, mindmaps, word clusters, questionnaires, spreadsheets, slideshows, audio(visuals) (.wmv, .mp4), etc.

Learning from peers

Each final product was shown to the other group. Not only was this peer comparison aspect repeated in the later role-play activities, but it also seemed to be very much appreciated by the students:

“[...] the fact that we had access to the work produced by each group is rare and very beneficial; it provided us with a great deal of knowledge and very interesting and useful notions for later on”.

Collaborative ice-breaking work leading towards group cohesion

Although students admittedly found that the week was extremely intense and that online collaborative work was hard to do in such large groups, on hindsight they were unanimously adamant that this experience was essential as an ice-breaker and that it helped them tremendously for the subsequent role-plays (or real-life situations), since they understood more clearly what would be expected of them at the next stage.

"I found this activity really interesting, especially from a practical viewpoint. It was particularly interesting because it allowed us to work collaboratively. We had to organise ourselves and make a joint effort in terms of writing. This was a simulation exercise, and is the sort of experience that we will almost certainly need to repeat in our future jobs".

Auto-evaluation, marks and reactions

The tutor also required students to evaluate their own personal and collaborative work and situate their own group in relation to the other. Some students found this aspect difficult and were not able to clearly perceive why this was requested. Others, who had not often conducted auto-evaluation, were intrigued.

Once the tutor had marked the student productions according to the following criteria: Asynchronous and synchronous week-long participation in exchanges (1.5 points); Participation in collaborative work and final synthesis, both form and content (2.5 points); Auto-evaluation (1 point), she issued a 17-page report, including student quotes, and final (marked) evaluation of student work.

In previous years, a long 17-page tutor report (posted on one of the Ning discussion lists) would have invariably provoked student reaction (whether positive or negative), but in this instance, interestingly enough, students did not give their opinion on the report at all, which initially surprised the tutor. Similarly, students did not seem to be particularly interested in the mark they had been given. This point is fundamental. When the activities are enticing enough, participation and group work is sufficient. The rest does not really count, or at least loses importance and is no longer the sole focus.

"Personally, I find that the mark is not that important. What makes me happy is that I've gained in several ways (practical competencies and human relations)."

2.4.3. Role-play: group distribution, tutor recline and tutor/student watch

Group distribution is not ad hoc; careful selection is important based on previous student exchanges

Once initial ice-breaking activities have taken place, students are ready for fully-fledged role-playing activities, which develop group cohesion, peer management and thus student autonomy. Once again, these aspects do not just happen. The seemingly informal initial discussion activities and first piece of group work (see section 2.4.2) are fundamental for gaining tutor/student trust. They are also highly important so that tutors can follow the exchanges between students and therefore plan the group distribution after two weeks or so. As previously specified (in section 2.2), students were placed in five groups of 4-5 students and they were not able to choose with whom they would be working. Tutors carefully conducted student distribution within the groups, according to previous discussion-group exchanges, by making sure those students they perceived as leaders were spread evenly across the five groups.

Tutors step back but students feel nevertheless guided

Interestingly enough, during the whole two-month role-play session, tutors occasionally felt ill at ease, in that they hesitated to intervene in student exchanges, worrying that if they did so, peer-

driven management might shift to teacher-centric communication, yet at the same time the tutors constantly wondered if their recline was beneficial or not to the students. When the one-week on-campus tutor/student session took place in December 2009, students were a posteriori asked about the tutors' attitude, and they unanimously agreed that this was one of the courses on which they had felt the most guided of all! The tutors' impression had been totally different in this instance; the schedule and stringent timeframe with specific role-playing tasks, along with alert methods (messages sent 24 hours ahead as reminders to students during the two-month long session) and encouragement messages (see section 2.4.1) helped the students by providing clear deadlines and specific required outcomes. Another important factor was the idea of having two tutors run the course, which meant that each tutor intervened in different ways along the path, and they were able to check with each other before going ahead and communicating with students. This back-and-forth movement between tutors is also a very important criterion for this sort of autonomy-seeking eLEN to succeed.

Supervising: Tutors watch students but students also watch tutors!

Even though tutors stepped back and let students get on with their own organisation and collaboration, they were able to spy and check student exchanges, albeit with little intervention. One student, in particular, found this position difficult:

"The teachers seemed to favour student auto-regulation within the Ning network, therefore they hardly intervened, apart from setting tasks. However, invisible doesn't necessarily mean absent, and the mere existence of this invisible presence is sufficient to slightly modify the initial intention. As such, the 'controlling eye', the 'inquisitor' is really there, in the shadows, and induces non-authentic student behaviour."

Most students, however, when queried during the December on-campus session, were not perturbed by this, and were even able to use it to their advantage: on one occasion, two students were conversing via synchronous chat and one of them was wondering if the tutors had actually taken a look at their online production; the other student responded: "Yes, one of the tutors is online now looking at it!" Indeed, tutors can watch students, but students can also watch tutors!

3. Conclusion

In this article the authors have described how social networks can be used effectively for pedagogical practice in French higher education and, it is hoped, in other countries too.

eLearning Exchange Networks (eLENs) can be used effectively if they are set up carefully, with specific tutor planning and student group ice-breaking activities, before introducing social learning objects through engaging projects. In this sense, pedagogy is paramount; one has to be careful not to fall into the trap of technological illusion, where novelty takes the forefront:

"Here, we do not want to go into the technological illusion that has been a characteristic feature of every period during which new pedagogical tools have been introduced (tape recorders, language labs, video,

computers, etc.). We consider that the essential aspect for efficient pedagogical practice is always connected with usage, content and support (teachers or tutors), which new tools or technologies should facilitate and foster." (Tomé, 2007; Audet, 2010, p. 78).

The innovative aspect of the tutors' work was to provide sufficient initial input and scaffolded support, and then to step back. Students need reassurance, but here, peer-group interaction often proved to be the most highly-sought form of support:

"Not a tutor or a teacher but rather peers are involved more and more in the learning process of the individual." (Ebner & Schiefner, 2008; Audet, 2010, p. 82).

One needs to make sure that the eLEN includes enough personal information to render it more personal than many basic VLEs: this includes photos, short individual profiles, page layout modification, etc.:

"One of the major advantages of the Ning network, which was used very well, was to incorporate a photo-portrait into each person's profile. A short personal description can also be added, which provides a human touch that is often lacking in eLearning. Each exchange is accompanied with the photo of each participant and mediated through an attractive, modular, fun and, therefore, adaptable interface, thus counteracting the impersonal nature of VLEs such as WebCT."

Page layout and easy accessible interfaces are not a gimmick; they are absolutely crucial to motivating students to step onboard. The tools must be easy to use; low profile technology and the open Web have huge advantages over confined VLEs that cannot be personally formatted by students.

Using the open Web does not compel usage of identification-free networks. In the three-year experiment, private eLENs (one whole-class group and several sub-class groups) were solely used, and other colleagues were not given access to the networks once these had been established with the students. This was implemented on the basis of the pedagogical reasoning that this social network was established between a clearly identified group of people (i.e. two tutors and the class members) and that interaction and exchange was built upon an understanding of exactly who was who and what their role was within the network. Colleagues who requested access to the group would not be participants but simply observers watching how it was working, and we believe that this goes against the very conceptual underpinning of a social network. This was initially a point of contention with colleagues who, in the modern day, like to find out about and learn from one another's pedagogical innovations.

However, once the students had been through a year's cycle and had obviously given positive feedback to the organisers of the degree course, the trust had been posited and sufficiently identified for colleagues to change their minds on the observer position. The point the tutors maintained here was that a specific pedagogical contract must be set up initially and used right through the process; bi-directional trust and respect lead to successful and enjoyable learning.

Once initial trust and respect is in place, the collaborative work can be set up. Collaborative work without persistent tutor intervention is important. For instance, in case study 5, even though top marks were distributed for their work by the tutors, this aspect became secondary to students who felt they had already learnt a lot from peer-group collaborative activities, and this aspect was sufficient in itself. These results could not have been obtained if tutors had remained in the limelight.

The tutors posit that even if the tools are up-to-the-minute, the pedagogical design must be sustainable. The social learning objects (Weller, 2008), need to be engaging and, if they are, students can then easily provide/create their own content with initial tutor guidance.

Hoping to use social networks in education in response to a trend is not a good idea. Learners only adopt a tool if they perceive it as being useful and meaningful for the task at hand (Vaufrey, 2009).

Educator and learner roles have changed with pedagogical network usage. Tutor-centric control now involves initial organisation followed by recline, or stepping back. When using social-learning objects, influence and shaping (Siemens, 2010)⁶ seem to have shifted a notch further towards true peer-group management, and learners seem to be quite happy to take their own responsibility for learning and sharing autonomously, and indeed achieve excellent outcomes, which tutors no longer strive to shape or influence directly:

“Teachers no longer take entire responsibility for content and [now] accept to share their authority; at the same time, this paradigm shift requires learners to be more active and confident in their capabilities.” (Audet, 2010, p. 77).

So, initial tutor organisation and structure along with clear timeframes lead to tutor/learner trust and, in turn, to interaction, sharing, collaboration, peer-group management, and most importantly autonomy and responsibility.

Students truly take centre stage now and they should stay there; teachers are in the wings, there if needed to prompt and facilitate, but not intervening unnecessarily. Initial trust (through ice-breaking activities) should clearly indicate to learners that the tutors believe that their students are capable of finding their own right learning path and should not be forced to follow the one that teachers have guided them to find.

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Appendix 1: Task calendar

| Team | Date informed of group and topic | Brief preparation (2 weeks) | Discussion (2 weeks) | Brief write-up (8 days) | Final brief hand-in date |
|------|----------------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1 | 20-Oct | 21-Oct - 3-Nov | 4-Nov - 17-Nov | 18-Nov - 26-Nov | 27-Nov |
| 2 | 27-Oct | 28-Oct - 10-Nov | 11-Nov - 24-Nov | 25-Nov - 3-Dec | 04-Dec |
| 3 | 03-Nov | 4-Nov - 17-Nov | 18-Nov - 1-Dec | 2-Dec - 10-Dec | 11-Dec |
| 4 | 10-Nov | 11-Nov - 24-Nov | 25-Nov - 8-Dec | 9-Dec - 17-Dec | 18-Dec |
| 5 | 17-Nov | 18-Nov - 1-Dec | 2-Dec - 15-Dec | 16-Dec - 7-Jan | 08-Jan |

Appendix 2: Example of role-play issued to team 2 on Social Networks

Background

As a result of recent developments in learning technologies, a wide variety of tools have become available (blogs, wikis, podcasts, social networks, microblogs, etc.). These tools have the capacity to bring about significant changes in our students' learning experiences.

The first social networks on the Internet emerged in 1995-96. Some people use slightly different terminology: social networking, social web, etc. in order to make the distinction between social networks on the Internet and the original sociological concept of social networks. Interest from the general public began in around 2000.

"Social networks are a set of Web 2.0 technologies allowing communities of practice to be created by people sharing some common interests, hobbies and activities." (Panckhurst & Marsh, AIPU presentation, 2008).

For several years now, the higher education sector has also taken an interest in these tools because they naturally fall within the Web 2.0, or semantic web, context, allowing participants to play an active role rather than simply visiting static pages. Some examples of these tools are Facebook (founded in 2004), MySpace (founded in 2003), Ning (founded in 2005) and Elgg (founded in 2004).

Open source online platforms for the creation of social networks or learning exchange networks:

- Allow users to free themselves from the constraints of having to use an institutional platform by choosing the open web.
- Provide a range of tools that are, or can be, directly integrated (videos, chats, discussion forums, blogs, RSS feeds, photos, external applications, profiles, etc.).
- Offer important ease of use.
- Use sophisticated user-friendly graphic interfaces.

The last of these points is important:

"In the rise of Web 2.0 what we've seen is an increasing emphasis on simple tools that perform one function very well instead of trying to be everything to everyone. [...] But can Web 2.0 tools truly replace something as big as a CMS? In my analysis, the answer is a resounding yes."

<<http://blogs.zdnet.com/web2explorer/?p=337>>

However, not everyone is convinced that these social/pedagogical networks allow learners to access "real" learning. Aren't they just supplementary technological devices? Do they really hold any interest? Once the technological fashion has moved on to something else, won't they disappear?

In addition, other tools called microblogs (Twitter, for example) have come onto the scene:

"Twitter is a website, owned and operated by Twitter Inc., which offers a social networking and microblogging service, enabling its users to send and read other users' messages called tweets. [...] All users can send and receive tweets via the Twitter website, compatible external applications (such as for smartphones), or by Short Message Service (SMS) available in certain countries."

<<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Twitter>>

Interest in social/pedagogical networks and microblogging is directly linked to the advent of Web 2.0 technologies. Those who are in favour of these tools claim that they can help learners not only to become more responsible through a process of semi-autonomous learning, but also to collaborate better with their peers.

But where is the proof? For those who have the pedagogical responsibility for setting up a learning exchange network, how should they go about it? What are the advantages/disadvantages in comparison to other more conventional tools?

Role-play

The Department of Language Sciences at Paul-Valéry University has already implemented some courses that use social networks and is aware of these developments. Now, the University would like to know more about what is happening in English-speaking countries and other European countries so that it can: 1) better advise other universities who have not yet taken a decision about which tool to use and who want to commit to innovative pedagogical approaches; 2) depending on the conclusions drawn from the study, possibly change the tools used at the University (Ning, Facebook).

The Director of the Department of Language Sciences, Sylvie Gomez-Pescié, has been in touch with your group of experts to ask you to supply a summary working paper that:

- compares the use of social networks in France with their use elsewhere in Europe and in English-speaking countries.

- acts as the basis for discussion at the next conference on social networks in higher education that the Department of Language Sciences plans to host at Montpellier 3 University in 2010.

Challenge

Your challenge is to:

- identify the most commonly-used social networks/microblogging tools in a pedagogical context in English-speaking countries and in France.
- compare the advantages/disadvantages of the various tools.
- try and suggest the network(s) that is (are) best suited to teaching in France.
- explain the implications and consequences (current and future) of using these networks in higher education.
- prepare an appraisal, in the form of a summary working paper, and submit it to the expert overseeing your study by midnight on Thursday 4 December.

Try to make your presentation as attractive and interactive as possible.

Organisation

You are a member of a group of five people: Déborah, Clémentine, Elsa, Andreea and Alexis.

Participation in the Ning forum is compulsory.

How you organise the work and draft the summary working paper is up to you.

| Dates | Activity |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| 28 October - 10 November | Collaborative work Carry out research Prepare a report Place: private group on Ning |
| 11 (or 12) November | Post the report on Ning: general space for all course members |
| 11 (or 12) November – 24 November | Create a discussion thread for the subject on Ning Place: general space on Ning (for all course members) |
| 25 November - 3 December | Draft the final summary working paper |

Getting Started

International conferences on open, distance and mobile learning themes. The themes are broader than social networks alone, but you will be able to find related topics:

<<http://www.online-educa.com/>>

<<http://www.conferencealerts.com/elearning.htm>>

<<http://www.uwex.edu/disted/conf/>>

<<http://www.mlearning-conf.org/cfp.asp><

<<http://www.academic-conferences.org/icel/icel2009/icel09-home.htm>>

ICDE 23rd World Conference: <<http://www.ou.nl/eCache/DEF/80/137.html>>

Social networks and education conference, Montreal University (March 2009)

<<http://www.matimtl.ca/web20.jsp>>

Associations

<<http://www.eadtu.nl/>>

<<http://www.educause.edu/>>

<<http://www.eden-online.org/eden.php>>

In French:

Thot - le monde de la formation à distance

<<http://www.cursus.edu/>>

Search for "réseaux sociaux" ("social networks") on the Thot website

<<http://www.cursus.edu/?module=search&searchString=r%C3%A9seaux+sociaux&searchType=AND&searchModule=ALL&subject=117>>

"Twitter, Facebook et Skype en faveur de la neutralité du web" ("Twitter, Facebook and Skype in favour of web neutrality") (20/10/09)

<<http://technaute.cyberpresse.ca/nouvelles/internet/200910/20/01-913045-twitter-facebook-et-skype-en-faveur-de-la-neutralite-du-web.php>>

<<http://veillepedagogique.blog.lemonde.fr/2009/07/08/%C2%AB-les-reseaux-sociaux-outils-d%E2%80%99apprentissage-en-devenir-applications-a-la-veille-et-a-l%E2%80%99intelligence-economique-en-enseignement-superieur-%C2%BB/>>

Social networks and language learning

<<http://www.cursus.edu/?module=blogs&action=getPost&bid=12&btype=USER&uid=19>>

<<http://www.francoisguite.com/2009/03/les-reseaux-sociaux-en-education/>>

In English:

Comparison of Facebook, Ning and Elgg

<<http://c4lpt.co.uk/handbook/comparison.html>>

<<http://web20teach.blogspot.com/2007/08/twitter-tweets-for-higher-education.html>>

<<http://chronicle.com/blogPost/A-Professor-s-Tips-for-Using/3643>>

<<http://www.lexrigby.com/2008/11/17/twitter-in-higher-education/>>

<<http://www.facultyfocus.com/free-report/twitter-in-higher-education-usage-habits-and-trends-of-todays-college-faculty/>>

<<http://www.universitybusiness.com/viewarticle.aspx?articleid=1285>>

<<http://www.classroom20.com/forum/topics/649749:Topic:147280>>

<<http://nancywozniak.wordpress.com/2008/07/09/the-use-of-facebook-in-education/>>

<<http://www.miltonramirez.com/2008/11/can-facebook-be-used-in-education.html>>

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