Monograph "The Impact of Social Networks on Teaching and Learning"

Higher Education and the Promises and Perils of Social Networks

George Siemens
gsiemens@gmail.com
Athabasca University

Martin Weller
m.j.weller@open.ac.uk
Professor of Educational Technology of the Open University

The last decade has produced tremendous innovation in how people connect with one another online. Social networks have experienced a rapid increase in popularity, producing both concerns (privacy, content ownership) and opportunities. The articles in this journal can be viewed as attempts to answer the question: What should educators do about social networks? The advent of socially oriented tools, often grouped together under the Web 2.0 or social media banner, represents something of a dilemma for higher education. Social network sites (SNSs) can be a real benefit for learners as they encourage peer-to-peer dialogue, promote the sharing of resources, facilitate collaboration, and develop communication skills. These are all features of online learning that conventional learning management systems (LMSs) have struggled to realize over the past decade

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of intensive adoption in higher education. Yet SNSs seem to have accomplished this with remarkable ease and speed.

Espuny, González, Lleixà and Gisbert suggest that SNSs can be seen as constructivist tools and ones which meet the aims of the new participatory methods being adopted in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). While universities often struggle to increase adoption of their LMSs, they have the opposite problem with SNSs in that they cannot stop students using them during lectures. In short, the educational potential of social networks are "practically endless", but current pedagogical practices often fail to capture this potential as the legacy of the one-way information flow model of many lecture halls and classrooms slows innovation.

Hitch, Richmond and Rochefort recognize the limited impact of social networks in formal education today. In response, they emphasize the need for educators to be skilled in networked teaching and learning. In particular, they argue that faculty skill development in effective use of social networks is an institutional responsibility. Much like higher education prepares learners to participate in society; it should also prepare staff and faculty for the new socially connected and networked world.

The Internet has altered many of the traditional power relations in education. Tasks that were previously the domain of faculty are now under the control of learners: searching for information, creating spaces of interaction, forming learning networks, and so on. Through blogs, wikis, online video, podcasts and open educational resources, learners are able to access content from leading lecturers and researchers around the world. Through the use of social media, learners are able to engage and interact with each other (and in some cases, directly with researchers and faculty). Panckhurst and Marsh explore the impact of learner autonomy in a multi-year research project, addressing the continued need for educators to provide soft, often peripheral, support. Surprisingly, learners perceive a course in which they have increased control as one that provides greater support and guidance than a traditional course.

Bouchard discusses the broad impact of networks, moving beyond teaching and learning to address new modes of knowledge growth. Does this mean that knowledge is a new entity in information networks? According to Bouchard, the nature of knowledge itself has not changed. Instead, as a consequence of participating in networks, individuals are beginning to discover "the value of uncertainty and fluidity" of knowledge. The experience of knowledge fluidity is related to the individual's journey of "epistemic maturity", and not necessarily to the attributes of knowledge. The distinction between personal knowledge and knowledge within a particular domain is one that promises much dialogue and debate in the future as educators explore social networks, learning and knowledge.

What types of practical steps can educators take to begin changing teaching practices to account for the opportunities generated by social networks? Ferguson offers a balanced approach to the use of questions in orienting learners to ill-defined problem domains. Questions can serve as an anchoring point or as a structuring method to guide learners. However, questioning is not always an appropriate starting point as learners "need opportunities to choose and examine a topic before they can start asking appropriate questions".

If one views learning as a largely social enterprise, as many do, then the new forms of socialization that social networks afford seem ready-made for adoption into higher education. We are, however,

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still early in exploring the impact of networks – social and technological – on teaching and learning. Much research needs to be conducted to explore how SNSs best fit into education. In particular, many rising tensions need to be addressed including: formal and informal learning, structured and unstructured learning spaces, learner and educator control, openness and closed content and social networks, and privacy and security in SNSs.

Espuny et al. draw attention to a key challenge: the most popular SNSs are the general ones, such as Facebook, MySpace and Twitter. Education-specific SNSs are almost entirely unused. This points to the dilemma facing higher education: social networks require a critical mass, they operate by the network effect, whereby the value of a technology increases as more people use it. This generates a positive reinforcement effect: the more people use a service then the more useful those users find it, thus recommending it and adding more users. The opposite is also true: without sufficient users the value of a social tool is not realized and users move elsewhere. Should educators create social networks specifically for teaching and learning (using tools such as Elgg, for example) or should they appropriate popular tools such as Twitter and Facebook for academic uses?

As well as the network effect, a second issue for higher education is that successful SNSs seem to blend personal and professional life; they do not separate them out. Some users of Twitter try to have multiple accounts for instance, to differentiate personal and professional comments, but it is precisely the personal element in SNSs that gives them value and interest. If this is removed, the result is a fairly dry, bland set of communications that seems at odds with the forms of dialogue found in these spaces that mix humour, resource sharing, ideas, personal observations, professional updates and comments.

When constructing online learning environments most universities have used the physical campus as a model, with the Boddington LMS (boddington.org) even representing this as a visual metaphor for navigation. Just as with a campus, many LMSs make a distinction between social spaces and formal education; thus there will be course areas and chat areas in LMS forums, just as there are student bars and lecture halls on campus. SNSs blur this distinction and seem to suggest that mixing all sorts of activity together can be useful. It is not that SNSs do not have structure; obviously they do. The structure of social networks is, not surprisingly, networked. Conflicts and tensions arise as the structure of networks clashes with the hierarchical structure of traditional education. Networks are defined by attributes of autonomy, reduced resistance to information flow, ease of connectivity, organic growth, rapid iteration and improvement of ideas and concepts, as well as ease of scalability. These attributes are antithetical to the existing model of higher education, where structure is defined by the centrality of the educator and the structured, generally one-way flow of content.

However, social learning networks are not explicit learning environments, often deliberately so. Even users of Facebook who are actually attending university do not make much use of them for direct educational purposes. Selwyn (2007) analyzed over 68,000 Facebook wall postings by students and found that education and university-related exchanges accounted for only a small proportion of the traffic. Students, like everyone else, use SNSs primarily for social conversations. There is strong resistance from students to universities and lecturers making formal use of SNSs, as this is seen as an invasion of their social space (e.g. Madge et al., 2009). When parents and professors start inhabiting

SNSs, it creates a role conflict (Selwyn, 2009) for students, as they struggle to know which face to present and find their communication stifled. These tools have huge potential for learning, but students do not want them to become the next LMS: organizationally controlled, bland and singular in focus (i.e. teaching). How best, then, can educators utilize the potential of these tools without destroying what makes them valuable to students? In short, universities need to find a way of avoiding the "creepy treehouse" phenomenon (Stein 2008), when authority is seen to try and invade a young person's social space.

The articles in this journal are focused mainly on the pedagogic possibilities of SNSs so as to avoid encroaching on learner social spaces. One of the effective approaches is not to use it to broadcast information, and not to control learning, but rather to facilitate student interaction and to encourage learning dialogue. Even then, we should remain cognizant of the context within which these tools are used. One of the more subtle dilemmas around the use of SNSs in higher education is that they appeal to students precisely because they are not controlled in the same manner as an LMS. But this lack of control raises a set of issues, particularly if a university endorses the use of a third party SNS. The promotion of the use of SNSs raises a number of policy issues for universities, including:

- Does the promotion of a particular SNS represent endorsement? For example, will a university have to justify its choice of Facebook over Twitter or a group-based network site such as Ning?
- To what extent does promotion suggest support? If a university promotes the use of one SNS and students encounter problems, is there an obligation on the university to offer technical support?
- Are universities responsible for activity with a chosen SNS? For example, if a university promotes the use of a particular SNS and subsequently another student bullies a student in that space, to what extent is this the concern and responsibility of the university?
- Is the university or the SNS responsible for privacy issues? There have been many problems surrounding privacy in SNSs, particularly with Facebook, yet if a student feels obliged to use such a site for their study, is the university in effect endorsing these privacy policies which may be in conflict with its own?
- Does the promotion of a particular SNS make it obligatory? Will students be disadvantaged if they elect not to use it?

An emerging research agenda

Resolving some of these issues in a manner that does not become overly bureaucratic and burdensome for students and educators will be the next phase of SNS research and adoption in higher education. Social networks are personal spaces where learners share their interests, hobbies, likes and dislikes through their profile. The connections that learners form can also review personal beliefs and interests (social networks have a "birds of a feather" effect where we gather with others who share our views and interests). This presents a difficult task for educators: using social networks

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to enlarge learners' awareness and critical inquiry of the impact of being connected and what a social graph reveals of a person, while simultaneously permitting learners to explore and define their own social space. This is not an easy task. Educators play a role in raising awareness of hidden assumptions of society and information, but doing so in personal social networks is a tricky balance.

This issue of RUSC offers a glimpse into the current role of SNSs in education. What will be interesting will be to revisit the continued use of SNSs in a decade, particularly for the generation of students who are now going through university and represent the first wave of users who are combining these informal online networks with formal education. As they move into the work force, will the networks they have established on SNSs become a vital element in their working life? Will their ongoing learning be realized through these networks, or will they be used for just staying in touch? Given the high levels of adoption of social networks in education, these may be the next set of questions that educators and researchers need to address as SNSs blur the boundary between formal and informal education.

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About the Authors

George Siemens
gsiemens@gmail.com
Athabasca University

George Siemens is a writer, theorist, speaker and researcher on learning, networks, technology, analytics and visualization, openness and organizational effectiveness in digital environments. He is the author of *Knowing Knowledge*, an exploration of how the context and characteristics of knowledge have changed and what it means to organizations today, and the *Handbook of Emerging Technologies for Learning*. Siemens is currently a researcher and strategist with the Technology Enhanced Knowledge Research Institute at Athabasca University. Previously, he was the associate director, Research and Development, with the Learning Technologies Centre at University of Manitoba.

Together with other researchers, Siemens has pioneered open connectivist courses that have included thousands of educators and students as participants. He is a frequent keynote speaker at conferences detailing the influence of technology and media on education, organizations and society, having presented at numerous conferences in more than 30 countries. His work has been profiled in provincial, national, and international newspapers, radio and television. Siemens has maintained the elearnspace blog (www.elearnspace.org/blog) for ten years and www.connectivism.ca for five years. Additional background information is available at www.elearnspace.org/about.htm.

Athabasca University
1 University Drive
Athabasca, AB T9S 3A3
Canada

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Martin Weller
m.j.weller@open.ac.uk
Professor of Educational Technology of the Open University

Martin Weller works on a number of projects at the Open University (OU). His general area of interest is e-learning. He was the OU VLE project director and is currently working in the area of learning design, VLEs, open content and Web 2.0 technologies. He chairs the master's degree course in Learning in the Connected Economy (H806). It was the first OU course to be developed purely as learning objects. Most of his research falls under the broad category of e-learning. His particular interests are VLEs, learning design, service-oriented architectures, open content, learning objects and new technologies in education.

Martin Weller's page at the OU: http://iet.open.ac.uk/people/m.j.weller

Martin Weller's blog: http://nogoodreason.typepad.co.uk/

Institute of Educational Technology
The Open University
Walton Hall
Milton Keynes
MK7 6AA
United Kingdom

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