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COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE. USING THE OPEN WEB AS A COLLABORATIVE LEARNING PLATFORM

Rachel Panckhurst (CNRS-Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3),
Debra Marsh (iConnect)

Abstract: The current interest and popularity in Web 2.0 applications has led literally to an explosion in popularity of social networking sites such as Myspace and Facebook. A social network focuses on the building and verifying of communities of people who share interests and activities, or who are interested in exploring the interests and activities of others. Participants engage in a variety of forms of communication and information sharing, which can include personal Web pages, blogs, and discussion groups.

Social networking places its focus on the learner and the interactions and provides a relatively informal space that allows learners to exercise their own thoughts, reflections, make their own connections. These features in particular have caused some educators, disillusioned with the highly structured virtual learning environments currently deployed in education which focus on course and content delivery, to ask: How can the potential of these networks be harnessed to promote and support learning.

Since May 2007 the authors of this paper have explored the use of social networks in three different educational contexts and evaluated the relative merits and challenges of social networking within the context of higher education professional development programmes (Montpellier 3 University in France and University of Hull in Great Britain).

This paper will compare and contrast the following three case studies and through this analysis will explore the process of setting up the networks and the resulting online interaction.

Keywords: Social networks, international bilingual collaborative eLearning, higher and further education, life-long learning.

1. Introduction: social networking in education

A social network is a collection of Web 2.0 technologies combined in such a way to help focus on the building of communities of people who share interests and activities, or who are interested in exploring the interests and activities of others. Participants in a social network usually engage in a variety of forms of communication and information sharing, which can include personal Web pages, blogs, and discussion groups. The current interest and popularity in Web 2.0 applications has led to the phenomenal popularity of social networking sites, such as Myspace and Facebook.

A recent NSBA [2007] survey showed:

how important social networking is today for young adults and how potentially effective this could be if there was a synergy, rather than a friction, between the online social interaction drivers of the new generations and the goals that schools in general are trying to achieve.

Research carried out by the University of California in Los Angeles [HERI, 2007] found that over 94% of first-year students spent at least some time on social networking sites in a typical week.

Social networking places its focus on the learner and the interactions and provides a relatively informal space that allows learners to exercise their own thoughts, reflections, make their own connections. These features in particular have caused some educators, disillusioned with the highly structured virtual learning environments (VLE) currently deployed in education which focus on course and content delivery, to ask: How can the potential of these networks be harnessed to promote and support learning?

Indeed, a recently commissioned British JISC *Learner Experience Project* concluded that universities can no longer afford to ignore social networking in the Web 2.0 context, as:

[it has] the potential to bring distance-learning students closer together in what would be a virtual campus.

Phipps, quoted by Hoare in the *Education Guardian*, suggests that:

The challenge for higher education is to learn how to integrate the social networking sites with traditional academic practice and traditional ICT systems.

2. Research Background

Since May 2007 the authors of this paper have explored the use of social networks in three different educational contexts and evaluated the relative merits and challenges of social networking within the context of higher education professional development programmes (Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3 in France, "Knowledge Management, Learning & eLearning": http://www.univ-montp3.fr/metice/_masterprogaf and University of Hull in Great Britain, "Master's of Education in eLearning": http://www.hull.ac.uk/ces/courses/post-graduate/taught/medelearning/index.html).

This paper will compare and contrast the following three case studies and through this analysis will discuss the benefits of social networking tools over institutional platforms to support collaborative learning and the development of communities of practice. This analysis will also identify key fundamental principles/criteria required to promote effective communities of practice through social networks and focus in particular on opportunities presented by social networking tools for multicultural and bilingual collaborative learning and the development of communities of practice across different professional groups.

3. Case studies

Case Study 1

A pilot study was conducted by the authors in May 2007 to explore the opportunities provided by online social networks. It involved French and British Master's off-campus learners. The purpose of including British learners was to explore potential for learning opportunities and exchange through differing cultural/linguistic perspectives on key issues. A private community eLEN (eLearning Exchange Network) was set up using Ning (www.ning.com), to provide virtual discussion space for international exchanges in a social network environment. After providing initial frameworks for learners to communicate within, they were encouraged to initiate and moderate discussion threads.

Case Study 2

A second pilot study took place over a two-week period in July 2007, with 15 adult mature learners from a continuous education programme at the Montpellier 3 University in a monolingual (French) but bicultural (France & North Africa) context. This group included mainly on-campus students (although two students were entirely off-campus).

Case Study 3

A third pilot study started in October 2007 with second-year Masters' students at Montpellier 3 University who are solely off-campus learners. A year-long eLEN has been set up in parallel to the existing online courses. This "backbone" social network aims to develop and support the independent and collaborative learning processes through a long thin structure running in parallel to the shorter structures of individual modules which make up the curriculum.

4. Case study analysis

Rather than following a mere pedagogical 'trend', the authors decided to initially adopt the social networking tools in the French and British Master's courses in response to previous research findings [Marsh, Panckhurst, 2006], showing that students required more flexibility in their programmes, and more support for collaborative learning. They needed a way in which to evolve and explore a more experiential approach within their learning/teaching environment. Even though tools like Ning seemed to provide this sort of space, several challenges became rapidly apparent: could we provide a space for effective group collaboration and sense of community? Would the moving away from the institutional VLE and towards yet another technological communication tool be appropriate for students and not just perceived as tutors wanting to add another "gadget"? How would this initiative fit in with the current curricula?

Students had already used a social network for private communication but using an eLEN was novel for them in a pedagogical situation. The analysis of the first case study highlighted a number of important findings (see below for details), ranging from ease of use/access, a sense of purpose, belonging and freedom, to students taking responsibility for autonomous learning, and working efficiently towards sharing knowledge in a creative collaborative group environment and thus branching out and forming a community of practice, which they felt promoted pedagogical innovation.

"[…] the suggestion to start a discussion on our own: this shows lots of things. Our perception of what is important in online learning, it also shows the way that we are "animating" our own forum (so we act a bit like teachers and tutors) etc. […] maybe this form of learning will be the future of eLearning? […] not a lot of technical innovation, only pedagogical...The roles are variable, everyone takes turn in being the teacher / mentor / guide in developing competencies...", Student B, 25/5/07.

The eLEN even continued after the official closure of the course and students set up another network in order to exchange ideas concerning summer internships, etc., which of course was a positive point for the tutors.

The second case study showed the importance of correctly inserting the eLEN into a specific curriculum so that students could clearly perceive the aims. It also showed that if the learners themselves do not perceive the need to come together online to form a community of practice then such a tool is redundant. In this instance, the eLEN experiment was set up too hastily (in order to respond to a request by those responsible for running the course) and too far into the course, without enough explanation concerning the objectives. A high percentage (over 90%) of the students were on-campus and most students were familiar with online tools for personal communication, but they were not used to (or at ease) with eLearning in a pedagogical situation: they were not aware of some of the basic principles of eLearning and working online, nor were they used to self-directing or being placed in learning situations requiring taking responsibility for their own learning.

The third case study will be completed in May 2008. In comparison with case studies 1 and 2, the year-long 'backbone' situation is quite different in that it requires a slightly different structure to eLENs that are set up for a shorter period. Motivation becomes crucial, and teachers/tutors need to know how to 'let go' and 'take the back seat', yet intervene at key moments. Students also need to learn to let go of a highly-structured 'teacher-centred' environment. One of the techniques used here is to make sure students have a combination of compulsory and optional activities so that they become familiar with the environment, gain a sense of 'ownership' and at the same time take the initiative to convert/modify the eLEN to suit their own needs. As a result the learners experience a collective sense of belonging and take an active role in the development and expansion of this community.

5. eLENs: key criteria

Through these three case studies, we have identified a number of benefits, key fundamental principles/criteria and opportunities which appear through pedagogical usage of eLENs. The 4 points appear below:

1. Opportunities presented by social networking tools for development of communities of practice across different professional groups

ease of use

- access to multicultural groups within same/similar professional context,
- access to individuals/groups which is not possible if limited to face to face content.

The online medium itself offers immediate opportunities for cross and multi-cultural interaction and knowledge sharing which only 20 years ago would not have been deemed possible. The possibilities are potentially endless, the only barrier is language.

2. Benefits of Social Networking Tools (which use the Open Web) over institutional platforms

- ease of use/setting up
- autonomy for learners and tutors i.e. no need for specialist technical support
- choice of features/design/look and feel left to learners/tutors
- each network has individual/group feel

- dynamic network built from scratch; nothing imposed from ‘outside’ the group.

In a recent JISC report, making easy non-institutional access to students was specified:

As tutors we need to design learning activities not limited by institutionally provided software. [JISC 2007, p. 2].

The usage of the open Web as a platform seems to be gaining terrain. It seems no longer important to decide which platform is the most appropriate for educational institutions, in a context where freely available tools on the Web can be substituted, or at least used in parallel. In the authors’ experience, students only use institutional platforms when specifically asked to do so and, when asked, often state a preference for tools which are less restrictive and less complex.

3. Identifying key fundamental principles/criteria required to promote effective communities

- a sense of purpose,
- group cohesion,
- tutor guidance becomes learner self-group management,
- learners provided with guidance to encourage/promote independence/autonomy
- learners need sense of 'ownership',
- teaching staff need to be prepared to 'let go' take a back seat',
- if assessment required think appropriately: number of postings not appropriate; reflection/diary/summary of activity relating to own professional context is appropriate

The greatest fear among teaching staff with regard to the use of such collaborative tools appears to be the fear of losing control, or the guilt feeling that ‘letting go’ may be perceived by students and colleagues as ‘doing nothing’. As a result many feel the need to be present and provide directive guidance and intervention. This, from the authors’ experience, can only lead to learner reluctance to interact openly and frankly. Indeed, with the latest case study, a number of their colleagues had to be persuaded that the use of such a community represented a positive rather than a negative in the learning context. The authors also spent time explaining to colleagues and student tutors, some of whom were quite reticent about the experiment, exactly what they were trying to achieve through usage of ‘backbone’ eLENs.

4. Opportunities presented by social networking tools for multicultural and bilingual collaborative learning

- ease of use/connection if sitting outside institutional technical constraints

The language aspect is crucial in a European higher-education context. The bilingual aspect was able to be approached in case study 1, since members of both groups had either written or spoken knowledge of the other language. The learners were allowed to choose their preferred form (language) of expression. It was also important that members were able to use asynchronous interaction, as this allows for easier bilingual interaction, i.e. time to compose/read/understand in foreign language.

5. Conclusion

The authors conclude from these three case studies that the Open Web can be used efficiently for collaborative learning. Effective communities of practice can emerge in these circumstances as long as tutors, and learners, accept certain changes in the pedagogical environment and perhaps more importantly changes within the ‘traditional’ learner/tutor roles. In order to set up an eLEN that is both effective and retains motivation and interest of its members, tutors/facilitators need to be prepared to invest a certain amount of time/effort in the early stages of the network to support the community. Planning and structuring the network in order for learners to take on the responsibility for their own learning is crucial. Specific, focussed tasks then need to be set for each learner. The learning will become ‘autonomous’ as long as tutors/facilitators ‘guide’ rather than ‘manage’ and change their roles so that learners feel comfortable with taking the initiative.

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Authors:

Dr Rachel Panckhurst
Praxiling UMR 5267 CNRS-Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3,
Computational Linguistics,
Route de Mende, 34199 Montpellier cedex 5
E-mail: rachel.panckhurst@univ-montp3.fr

Rachel Panckhurst is a maître de conférences (senior lecturer) in computational linguistics at the University of Montpellier 3, France. She was director of the University METICE centre for open, distance and virtual education (1999-2001). Her current research interests include computer-mediated communication and evaluation for lifelong learning. She is co-author of an introductory book on information and communication technologies which was published in 2000, and she is co-editor of two books: one on autoevaluation and guided self-learning (2002) and the other on evaluation in eLearning (2004).

Debra Marsh
e-learning consultant, iConnect,
95, rue Jules Renard, 34130 Mauguio
E-mail: debramarsh@gmail.com

Debra Marsh was Head of eLearning at the University of Hull, UK until July 2002 and project managed the development and implementation of Merlin, the University of Hull's own virtual learning environment. She now works as a freelance eLearning consultant and is based near Montpellier, France. She is currently working for the University of Cambridge, UK on a number of eLearning initiatives. Her specific interest and expertise lies in the pedagogical issues raised when designing for and implementing eLearning and she has recently co-authored a practical resource book for online tutors.