Can Social Networking Tools Foster Informal Learning?

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Social networking is a relatively recent and growing phenomenon that involves social software and tools. This paper describes how social networking can foster informal learning. Current tools and services used in social networking, design strategies and characteristics that promote participation in social networking, and social networking as a learning tool for members will be discussed.

What is Social Networking?

Just when many of us thought we understood how to use email, could shop online, and search the Web for recipes or the long-lost instruction manual for a piece of equipment in the garage, the Web is evolving. Now we hear about blogs, podcasts, Facebook, and MySpace. These are some of the tools and technology associated with a recent phenomenon called social networking, and it is everywhere.

Social networking has become part of the daily life experiences for an increasing number of people. Penuel and Riel (2007) define social network as “a set of people and the relationships between them” (p. 611). That definition is found today in the social networking services that promote the development of online communities of people. Social networking services such as Facebook, MySpace, Flickr, Orkut, and YouTube are sites where users apply for membership and maintain their personal profile information in a centrally organized database. Each network member controls access to their profile by accepting or declining requests from other network members to be “friends.” By expanding and developing their network of friends, social networking members are able to maintain online relationships for work, study, special-interest, or leisure-related purposes.

Social Networking Tools and Services

The experiences of people participating and interacting in social networking services are influenced by the continuing evolution of Web-based software design and practice. In early Web-based programming and software, the focus and goals reflected the need for online content to be standardized and universally accessible to all users. At the time, in the 1990s, computer hardware was the platform or scaffold from which software programs were installed and run on individual devices. Users would execute the functions of the software programming from their own devices. Since approximately 2004, software tools have evolved to allow users to do more than just locate, view, and download information. Known as Web 2.0 or social software, the Web itself is now considered the platform and the software is a service. This means that instead of individuals upgrading and licensing their software programs, now it is the site that provides the software as a service for its users.

Social networking services utilize the participation technology and software tools to facilitate communication and interaction between members. Social software communication tools include blogs, wikis, instant messaging, chat rooms, message boards, and social bookmarking. Members use these tools to share online ideas, documents, photos, videos, favorite websites, actually almost anything. As more
people participate in social networking, the question becomes: is it merely a social activity, or are they involved in learning?

**Design Strategies and Characteristics that Promote Participation in Social Networking**

Certain design features of social networking tools reflect evolving and creative approaches to promote participation by members. The participating network members are no longer considered an audience, but instead are consumers of services. Four design characteristics of social networks can promote learning: (a) participation platform, (b) microcontent and openness, (c) constructing knowledge, and (d) targeting specific users.

**Participation Platform**

Participation platform means that frameworks designed for the online services and tools are based upon what O’Reilly (2005) describes as a key social software principle, that the networking service gets better the more people use it. Members have the ability to participate in the production and sharing of content. They make decisions about what topics and issues they want to discuss and how they want to talk about them. This design strategy promotes the development of relationships and connections among participants through dialogue. The outcome of online dialogue is the exchange of ideas, flow of information, and sharing of resources. Members are able to participate in real-time or asynchronously which allows them the flexibility to consider what is posted, construct a response, and refine or revise responses and feedback. The participation platform allows social networking members to share information about themselves and to find out what others are thinking and saying about topics and issues they are interested in. This design feature helps members who tend to be more introverted in face-to-face situations, have time to consider and compose a response with decreased social pressure.

**Microcontent and Openness**

A design feature or characteristic that has evolved with the tools and promotes participation by social networking members involves the concepts of microcontent and openness. Alexander (2006) describes microcontent as:

> Blogs are about posts, not pages. Wikis are streams of conversation, revision, amendment, and truncation. Podcasts are shuttled between Web sites, RSS feeds, and diverse players. These content blocks can be saved, summarized, addressed, copied, quoted, and built into new projects. (p. 33)

Openness that involves the two-way flow of information is also described by Alexander (2006) as a necessary component in social web technology. The concept of openness is what provides members with the ability to work together to generate, exchange, edit, revise, and publish their content. Consider Wikipedia—an open community wiki that encourages anyone to add, edit, and publish content. The site is not asking for long and detailed documents, but the sharing of chunks of information with the understanding that all content is open to the review and editing by others.

**Constructing Knowledge**

Construction of knowledge is a characteristic that is closely related to the concepts of microcontent and openness. Social networking members utilize collaboration and self-directed learning to construct knowledge. Alexander (2006) refers to the “wisdom of crowds” proposal that suggests large collective groups of people are better at solving problems and facilitating creativity and innovation. Social software tools are designed to allow others to view and access ideas, easily download reusable content, and follow
links to popular websites and resources. As a group or community shares information, all participating members benefit from the collective knowledge and experience. Goodman (2007) describes how patients and students are constructing knowledge by becoming “increasingly interactive, exchanging information, building web communities, generating new ideas and providing feedback on a range of issues” (p. 61).

Del.icio.us is an example of a social software service that provides a system of managing favorite online websites and links that may be used to construct knowledge. Social bookmarking software allows users to share and store bookmarks on a service or site. This allows access from any web-based device for the user, and allows other people to see the tags and bookmarks—creating a social network of users who are linking to popular and creative sites.

**Targeting Specific Users**

The design strategy of targeting specific users is about identifying people who share concerns, problems, and/or passions. In addition to being an approach used by participants in social networking communities, it is also used by advertisers and administrators to target messages to specific groups or communities. Facebook members can search for other members who are interested in attending an upcoming event. There are network communities of travel nurses who are interested in sharing their experiences with each other. Facebook members have also organized networks for protesting the decision to allow advertisers to target network members with Facebook Flyers.

**Social Networking as a Learning Tool for Members**

There are benefits for participating in social networks. We address four advantages of social networking as a learning tool in this paper: establishment of new relationships, learning how to collaborate, promotion of communication skills, and promotion of personal development.

**Establishment of New Relationships**

Social networking fosters the development of new relationships through access and participation in online communities. Depending on the social network service, members are open to groups of people who meet the site’s criteria (age, institution-based, interest-based, etc.). Through networking, members may develop global relationships and participate in web communities that introduce them to new and different types of people. Members share experiences, expertise, and gain recognition through interactions in the community.

Fiedler (2007) stated that members “make use of these networked tools and services to establish new relationships and to construct extended social networks to support their own educational projects” (p. 1356). The benefit of finding others based on specific criteria (for example, special interests, work, or organizations) “is all about making connections and participating in online communities…the website knows who the user’s friends are, and may even know people that user would like to meet or things the user likes to do” (Skiba, 2007, p. 214).

Facebook will alert users when one of their friends has a new “friend.” It gives the users the opportunity to approach this friend-of-a-friend with an offer for them to get to know each other. When users include a favorite musician in their Facebook profile, the network provides a list of other members who also like that performer. Families establish social network communities that allow members to keep in contact with siblings, cousins, and others, to share photos, and find extended members who may have been out of contact.
Learning How to Collaborate

The Web 2.0 social software is an example of technology and tools that have been developed through collaboration for the purpose of promoting collaboration among its users. Social networking members are actively involved with other people in constructing, editing, and publishing - they are not the passive audience of earlier web-based technology. By actively participating in a social networking community, members promote social conversations, they listen to others, provide each other with feedback on issues, and role model behaviors. Penuel and Riel (2007) describe how relationships and a network is developed among members as they work together to identify issues and solve problems through negotiation and collaboration. Relationships are developed based on the use of tools, not on the physical presence of face-to-face groups. Formal educational settings utilize social software tools to promote collaboration among students. Learning management systems feature blogs, wikis, instant messaging for students to use to work together with each other and their instructors.

Promotion of Communication Skills

Social networks have become a popular tool for social communication and development of reading and writing skills. O’Hanlon (2007) reports on school-oriented social networking sites for young teens 12-17 years of age. These students are more attuned to grammar and punctuation now that they know their writing will be reviewed by their peers. O’Hanlon further states that students “are so much more comfortable with writing…because they write more” (p. 6). Another benefit that can also be a concern is the social responsibility of communicating online. Awareness of risks and responsibilities of participating online are concerns and seen as opportunities for instruction by teachers.

A blog is an online diary or journal that provides opportunities for writing and expressing ideas. It may reflect editorial-type comments, or personal reflections. The entries are posted in reverse chronological order. Podcasts that are audio or video recordings are a more sophisticated tool to promote communication skills. They may be used by instructors to augment course content, or students may develop a podcast based on class topics or assignments. Podcasts are also developed and shared on public sites as users share their creative projects.

Promotion of Personal Development

Another benefit for social networking members is personal growth and development. The Educause Learning Initiative (2006) has described that one of the developmental tasks of college-age students is to “discover who they are and how they relate to others. For many, Facebook has become a tool in that development, allowing them to define a profile, find others with similar interests, and then reassess how well they fit” (p. 2). Online identity is not dependent on physical characteristics of race, gender, age, or physical abilities. Social networking activities provide members with a sense of empowerment – they are able to control their interactions with the tools and with other people. Social networking members are learning how to be and act in the world. Social networking tools allow users to choose from a growing number of options to pursue social and learning activities.

Conclusions

Can social networking tools foster informal learning? Social networking with its tools and services can and does promote informal learning. This learning is fostered through the use of networking tools such as blogs, wikis, instant messaging, chat rooms, message boards, and social bookmarking that promote participation by members. Through the sharing of ideas and the give-and-take of collaboration and negotiation, members develop relationships and connections with others who share or complement their
interests and activities. As networking members learn to listen and communicate with each other they are practicing skills that promote dialogue in contrast to the monologue discussions of the early Web.

In addition, social networking as a learning tool provides opportunities for personal development and self-directed learning for participating members. Members learn to use the technology and software tools to develop communication skills, expand their knowledge about the world, themselves, and their relationships with others. The popularity and versatility of social networking tools, services, and strategies makes them also desirable tools for formal education settings where participants, students of all ages, will benefit from the collective wisdom and experience of groups of people working together.

References


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