Social Networking in Distance Education: Academic Freedom and Intellectual Property

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Introduction

Social networking is growing in influence in distance education. Blogs, wikis, Facebook, Myspace, Twitter, and related applications are expanding the notion of what is involved in successful and fulfilling distance learning and teaching interaction. This presentation formulates faculty, staff, and student participation in social networking in terms of personal and institutional investment. As increased resources are placed in social networking vehicles, adequate returns-on-investment will be expected and often required. Concerns are subsequently arising about ownership and control of social networking contributions as well as various related academic freedom issues. The emotional investments involved will also become a compounding factor as certain social networking modalities rise and fall in popularity or in perceived safety and support. This presentation places these matters in their broader educational and economic contexts and analyzes specific institutional policies.

Investments in Social Networking Modalities: To Tweet or Not to Tweet

Social networking vehicles have infiltrated a great deal of workplace and academic interaction (McFedries, 2007). They are blurring the boundaries between formal, highly structured academic work and informal, less tightly focused interaction. The questions “do you have a blog?” and “do you tweet?” are increasingly being asked of faculty and staff members working in distance education contexts as well as of students pursuing higher education. Maintaining Facebook and/or Myspace pages and related social networking media poses puzzling questions to those in academe: what is relevant to include? How often should the pages be updated? What comments of others should be censored, and which should be allowed?

Being an agile and responsive participant in social networking contexts requires considerable effort. Active participation and decision making are involved on an everyday (and often every hour or minute) basis. More passive, technologically-enhanced means of “keeping in touch” are certainly conceivable and are sometimes employed by faculty and staff. One can have a perpetually-on “office cam” on one’s desk, for example, that would require little direct effort or cognitive support to maintain. However, the currently popular modes of online social participation are often time intensive and require cognitive energies (and often intense levels of creativity as well). In the past decades, many academics became comfortable with maintaining a personal website and monitoring streams of e-mail correspondence. The level of investment of time and energy into these media are not precisely known, but are at least within some conceivable range. However, new and often confusing standards are taking shape for each of the social networking vehicles that are emerging.

Every form of human communication requires some kind of investment. The investment of time, energy, money, and cognitive engagement placed in social networking creates new problems: devoting such precious resources over time infuses the social networking vehicle and its content with increased levels of academic and research value. However, modes of social networking change quickly, often in ways that
relate to contexts other than academe, creating risks for those who invest. For example, maintaining a weblog may have once been a common mode of information dissemination and communication related to a particular topic area. Twitter may usurp this role, possibly diminishing somewhat the value of previous investments in establishing a weblog presence. Similarly, some of those who devoted substantial time and effort to developing MySpace presences were unsettled when Facebook became a better-populated outlet for some purposes.

Levels and forms of institutional investments are also making this situation more complex. For example, by providing support for the development of weblogs, institutions often expect at least some form of control over the product as well as some increase in the academic or social standing of the university as a result. Fluctuations in the popularity or perceived usefulness of various social networking vehicles provides increased intricacies for institutions in deciding what to support and how to do so.

Faculty and staff who may not construe their social networking in terms of their professional efforts may find that they are soon very much drawn into these apparent “investment” dimensions. Even though many faculty members may want to segregate their academic and research lives from their social networking pursuits, the two are becoming intertwined, often in problematic ways. For instance, through a simple Internet search interested parties can generally ascertain the political affiliations and interests of faculty members. Choosing to “unplug” from social networking vehicles may do little to prohibit one’s colleagues and acquaintances from discussing one’s own activities in them. The notion of being “forced to blog” or required to update a Facebook page may seem absurd but many faculty and staff are receiving social pressure to participate in social technology—especially in distance learning contexts. They will have to weigh carefully their allocations of time and energy in this regard as well as gain some sense of how to balance their personal and professional reflections.

**Academic Freedom for Tweets?**

As often related in academic contexts, one of the underpinnings of the higher education systems of the US and many Western nations has been the notion of “academic freedom” (Hofstader, 1955; Metzger, 1955). However, as media allow for the recording and analysis of details of online course activities, the classroom can become a “fishbowl” (Clement, 1992; Oravec, 2003). This presentation provides an assortment of scenarios of how social networking investments are currently influencing distance education contexts in this regard and how it may affect them in the future. The following are a sampling of the basic topics of concern:

- **surveillance of everyday interaction:** Administrators can readily monitor many social networking platforms for patterns of faculty, staff, and student interactions and/or specific keywords or themes. This can potentially result in a “chilling effect” upon speech and ultimately undermine academic investments in these platforms.

- **privacy of critique of student work:** Faculty members who make comments critical of student contributions in social networking contexts may find that their remarks are more widely shared than originally intended. This may cause embarrassment for students on a scale not found in face-to-face classroom activities. Faculty free expression issues are also a factor. Student awareness and control of their own “intellectual property” in social networking contexts is a related issue.

- **confusion about whether tweeting (and other social networking activities) are “publication” or “speech”?:** Construction of social network activities as publication instead of speech (by emphasizing their written and readily disseminated dimensions)
may remove some of the protections generally associated with them. Case law is just emerging in this regard.

As manifested in the scenarios, social networking investments have the potential to affect the quality of online academic interaction as well as academic life (and its emotional and personal aspects) itself.

**Social Networking and Academic Freedom: Erosion of the Roles of Faculty and Staff?**

Maintaining a presence on a social networking vehicle can indeed be frustrating and time consuming. Updating a weblog or generating series of tweets can occupy time that academics often need in order to do more traditional teaching and research. Many social networking sites are well populated with individuals who do not have the immediate demands of working faculty members; people who are retired or unemployed can often devote a great deal of time to their social networking efforts, thus setting a high standard that many faculty and staff may not be able to meet. In the advent of social networking vehicles, roles of faculty and staff as “experts” may consequently be made problematic in much the same way journalistic expertise has been challenged. Social networking has already played a major part in the dismantling of some traditional media outlets, upstaging the traditional journalist with a regular daily deadline instead of one that is continuous.

Gyrations in the traditional roles of faculty and staff in relatively normal economic conditions may be troublesome but in today’s strained economic conditions they can be especially traumatic. Emotional stakes in these troubled times are complex. A failed investment in one mode of social networking and the jettisoning or “orphaning” of a blog or Facebook page can take a severe personal toll that can have a rippling effect. Just as failed economic investments rattled individuals during economic downturns, soured investments of time and effort in social networking can be harmful.

**Some Conclusions and Reflections: Social Networking in Distance Education**

Social networking is obtaining a central role in support of academic inquiry and exchange. The activity of “tweeting” may sound trivial and efforts to update a Facebook page may appear to be a mere distraction. However, the creation and maintenance of a social networking presence can link participants with worldwide resources and compel them to keep current on a variety of issues and themes. In distance education contexts, such vehicles can expand dramatically the range of communication involved and serve as a motivating factor for participants.

Social networking participation is indeed an investment, most importantly an emotional and cognitive one. As with any kind of investment its value can shift dramatically because of circumstances such as the development of new social networking modes or the movement of individuals from one mode to another. The success or failure of academic freedom and intellectual property support may be an important variable here. Participants in social networking in academic contexts require some level of academic freedom and intellectual property protections for their personal expressions. Social networking is indeed creating new personal and academic expectations for faculty and staff in various contexts as well as for students-- and these changes are coming at a rapid (and fairly unsettling) pace.

**References**


**Author Summary**

*Jo Ann Oravec* is an Associate Professor in the College of Business and Economics at the University of Wisconsin at Whitewater. She received her MBA, MS, MA, and PhD degrees at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. She taught computer information systems and public policy at Baruch College of the City University of New York and also taught in the School of Business and the Computer Sciences Department at UW-Madison. In the 1990s, she chaired the Privacy Council of the State of Wisconsin, the nation's first state-level council dealing with information technology and privacy issues. She has written books (including *Virtual Individuals, Virtual Groups: Human Dimensions of Groupware and Computer Networking*, Cambridge University Press) and dozens of articles on education, peace studies, public policy, communications, and computing technology issues. She has worked for public television and developed software along with her academic ventures. She has held visiting fellow positions at both Cambridge and Oxford.

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