Social Networking as an Instructional Tool

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Abstract

The use of social networking tools has grown over the last couple of years with sites and services like MySpace, Flickr, and de.licio.us, and instructors and administrators have begun to investigate what role these tools could play in higher education. This presentation addresses the challenge of clearly defining what does and does not constitute social networking, assesses research that investigates the effectiveness of social networking tools used as part of instruction, and synthesizes current opinions on the promise of social networking and its expected future use within higher education. Finally, it reviews how the promise of social networking technologies is being explored at the UNC School of Government.

Outline/ Presentation Notes

What Is Social Networking?

Social computing suggests using computers and software to communicate and collaborate. The Web site for the RIT Lab for Social Computing defines it as "Millions of people can stay connected using instant messaging clients and e-mail services. Companies across the world are no longer limited by international borders, distance, or by the time consumption of travel. Information can be shared user to user, or group to group with great simplicity. The study of social computing examines how this works, why it works, and how we as an intellectual community can make these technological advances better."

Social software tools narrow the field of possible tools to the software that use the internet to facilitate communication. As defined by Screebny (2007): "Blogs, wikis, and other social software tools all have their own characteristics, but they share a common theme—they help people connect with each other over the Web. While this has been true throughout the history of the Internet, as discussed above, the new tools have some distinguishing traits that collectively allow a new level of interactivity. Where previous Web tools allowed individuals to easily publish information online, these new social tools encourage conversations between individuals about the ideas expressed in Web pages" (p. 8).

Social networking appears to get at something deeper than the broad concept of social computing and focuses on what is being done rather than on the tools. The *2007 Horizon Report* describes the importance of social networking: "The heart of social networking is fostering the kinds of deep connections that occur when common pursuits are shared and discussed" (p. 12).

At the same time the language evolves from computing to social computing to social software to social networking, roughly parallel definitions are used to describe the evolution of the Internet from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0. Kop (2007) describes the evolution: "Over the past five years, the Internet has moved on from being a resource of

information (Web 1.0) to emerge as an instrument of communication and networking (Web 2.0)" (p. 194).

But Web 2.0 is more than a set of tools. It is a philosophy about how we communicate and work with information. Watson and Harper (2008) explain how this philosophy has transformed what we do online: "Essentially, [Web 2.0] is a philosophy supporting the development of online collaborative technologies, and it has changed how the World Wide Web is perceived and used. The concept surrounds the change from Internet users being visitors to a Web where knowledge is pre-created and view-only to a Web in which users can participate in knowledge creation through technologies such as wikis, blogs, RSS feeds, folksonomies, and tagging" (p. 3).

So how can we move from philosophies and multiple, broad understandings to a definition we can effectively put into practice? In order to develop a usable definition, I recommend building from the ground up. Start by analyzing the tools, thinking about why we would want to use them, and exploring how we would use them for postsecondary education. So let's start by making the term we are defining more specific: Social Networking Tools for Education.

Possible Tools

Social Networking Sites: Spaces like Facebook and MySpace that students are using to socialize. The focus is on the individual, his/her interest, and a network of "friends."

Wikis: Wikipedia is the most well-known example. These tools provide a collaborative space for working on information. Multiple people can create and edit chunks of information and hold discussions about those edits. They can also create links between chunks of information.

Social Bookmarking: The clearest example is del.icio.us, which allows you to bookmark a site and add key words for the site. They words you use to describe the site are stored in a database. The most common words become part of a tag cloud of related key words, with most common key words appearing larger. Selecting a word from a tag cloud displays a list of sites most commonly associated with that word. In this way, a large group of people have each contributed a small piece toward a massive categorical schema of Web sites. The technology can be better thought of as "social tagging," because the same approach can be applied to any type of information. Flickr, for example, creates the same socially created network of tags related to photographs rather than Web sites.

Blogs: Web logs that allow individuals or groups of people to post information and have it date/time stamped. People can leave comments about the posting or about other comments. An individual blog does not represent a network, but blogs frequently reference other blogs. In this sense, the blogosphere is a social network, although it feels substantively different from wikis and social bookmarking.

Webconferencing: Using the Internet to synchronously communicate with multiple people through chat, video, audio, screen sharing, and other tools.

Virtual Worlds: Three dimensional representations of worlds that one can explore with avatars and communicate with other people represented by their avatars. Interaction and communication happens synchronously, although you can also leave objects, files, and other information that could be found or viewed later.

Conclusions

Social networking sites are the social places. They focus on people, with profiles, postings about profiles, and networks of profiles. Social networking tools focus on information. In this sense, it is not about synchronous versus asynchronous. The focus is on two practices: (1) collaborative creation of information and (2) collaborative creation of the structure of information. Active learning is frequently cited as a pedagogical goal. Most instructors focus on having students actively grapple with what the information is and what that information means. Social networking tools provide a mechanism that allows instructors to expand active learning to include how we understand that information and how it connects to other information.

At the UNC School of Government, we are looking at social networking tools to help our students understand the facts and then work together on how those facts are assembled to create meaning and application. Much of our instruction is practice-based, working with professionals in government. Social networking tools offer the potential to engage government officials in the development of resources that serve the broader community.

One example is Water Wiki (http://water.unc.edu). This collaborative space will be the working area for a water reallocation study being completed for North Carolina. It also serves as a repository of information and resources about water and the environment that is built by experts and professionals around the world and can serve both a global and local audience. In this sense, Water Wiki serves as a pilot study for how we might be able to cover a range of subject areas and professional communities.

URLs

Activeworlds (http://www.activeworlds.com)
Adobe Connect (http://www.adobe.com/products/connect/)
Art News Blog (http://www.artnewsblog.com)
boingboing (http://www.boingboing.net)
del.icio.us (http://del.icio.us)
Elluminate (http://www.elluminate.com)
Elon University: ARH 341(http://arh341.pbwiki.com/)
Facebook (http://www.facebook.com)
flickr (http://flickr.com)
Isaac Hunter's Tavern (http://www.wunc.org/programs/news/Isaac-Hunters-Tavern)
lifehacker (http://lifehacker.com)
myspace.com (http://www.myspace.com)
Obscure Sounds (http://obscuresound.com)
R.I.T. Lab for Social Computing
(http://social.it.rit.edu/2005/02/social_computin_1.php)
Second Life (http://secondlife.com)
SocialNet Wiki (http://sogweb.sog.unc.edu/socialnet/)
There (http://www.there.com)
Water Wiki (http://water.unc.edu)
Wikibooks (http://wikibooks.org)
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