

Social networking sites: Transparency in online education

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The paper discusses the question: *What are the pedagogical potentials of social networking sites?* Whereas collaboration and user-generated content are often highlighted as major potentials of Web 2.0 technologies, the paper argues that a central characteristic of social networking sites such as Facebook, Myspace, Bebo and Ning is a combination of *personalization and socialization*. This combination has a potential to facilitate *transparency* between students. Transparency gives students insight into each other's work.

Social networking sites do not necessarily involve communication, dialogue or collaboration. Instead, the paper argues, transparency is a dominating feature. An interesting aspect of social interaction in social networking sites is that the starting point is the *individual or personal*. This is in opposition to discussion forums, in which communication always takes place in a *shared* forum. In a social networking site each individual has a personal page and profile, which the individual develops and modifies.

The paper will discuss how social networking may be utilized within university education by students sharing information and resources that are originally developed for themselves, but made available to others - for instance bookmarks, references, links, and notes. In conclusion, the paper argues that the pedagogical potential of social networking lies within transparency and the ability to create awareness between students - potentially across institutions and nations.

2. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of the paper is to discuss the question: *What are the pedagogical potentials of social networking sites?* Often, potentials for collaborative activities and user-generated content are highlighted in relation to social software and Web 2.0 technologies - also in the context of online education. "Social" is often described as communication, construction and collaboration. This paper will focus on different qualities of social software and Web 2.0 that are characteristic of social networking sites such as Facebook, Myspace, Bebo or Ning. The paper will argue that a central characteristic of social networking sites is a combination of *personalization and socialization*. This combination has a potential to facilitate *transparency* between students.

Transparency between students means that they have insight into each other's work, thoughts, and productions. Not least within online education, transparency is not a given. Students might work at a distance and individually, and, thus, they are not necessarily aware of the activities of other students. In their individual work, however, students write notes, search for literature, find relevant websites, write assignments, etc. This information and these products are relevant to other students.

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This is the characteristic of personalization and socialization. The starting point for this kind of social interaction is students' own work and their personal pages. The personal pages are then shared in a social network. The paper will discuss how this approach may be utilized within university education by students sharing information and resources that are originally developed for themselves, but made available to others - for instance bookmarks, references, links, notes, etc.

3. LEARNING IN GROUPS, COMMUNITIES, COLLECTIVES, OR NETWORKS?

Which social infrastructures support learning? This question has been discussed from several perspectives. There is an ongoing debate concerning potentials of different forms of social interaction: groups, communities, collectives, connections and networks (Dron & Anderson 2007; Downes 2007; Wenger et al. 2005; Anderson 2008; Ryberg & Larsen 2008; Jones 2004; Jones et al. 2006; Siemens 2005). The debate has its origin in the concept of network, which challenges a number of other forms of social relations. As Dron & Anderson (2007) state, research and practice of e-learning has primarily focused on groups. They describe groups as "individuals who see themselves as part of that group". A group is a defined collection of individuals, such as a study group, who in some way are engaged in joint work.

Further, Jones et al. (2006) criticizes Wenger's concept of communities of practice and the tradition of CSCL. Jones et al. argues that the two traditions are not able to describe the kinds of relations that exist within learning environments. The traditions of communities of practice and CSCL have traditionally focused on participation, collaboration, and negotiation of meaning (Wenger 1998). In other words, tightly knitted structures. Use of technology in support of groups and communities of practice has often focused on collaboration, especially within the field of CSCL (Jones et al. 2006). This stresses the emphasis within e-learning and also more broadly within technology supported learning on supporting or developing tightly knitted social structures.

The concept of network has challenged these concepts of tightly knitted social constructs. Networks are loosely organized structures (Dron & Anderson 2007), in which people do not necessarily collaborate - or communicate directly. However, the question is what role networks play in relation to learning. A conclusion of this debate is that there exists a form of social interaction - social

networking - that learning theories have difficulties explaining. The question is: What kind of relations support learning? And more specifically, how do networks support learning?

Jones (2004) uses the concept of networked learning and draws a direct line between networking and learning. He stresses the importance of facilitating “connections between learners, learners and tutors, and between learners and the resources they make use of in their learning” (Jones et al. 2006, p. 90). Jones (2004) writes: “Networked learning doesn’t privilege any particular types of relationships between people or between people and resources.” The problem with this definition is that it does not answer what kind of relations should be supported. However, because studies within networked learning according to Jones (2004) have primarily focused on strong links, he wants to draw attention to the so-called weak ties. This is an interesting focus, because it is the support of weak ties that makes social networking sites unique. I will focus on what could be termed weak ties. However, as Ryberg & Larsen (2008) argue, it is important to clarify what defines weak ties, and how they differ from strong ties. Further, it is necessary to clarify, how these kinds of social relations support learning. Thus, it is necessary to make a connection between learning and types of social relations.

4. SOCIO-CULTURAL LEARNING THEORY

The socio-cultural perspective of this paper emphasizes problem-oriented and self-governed learning activities (Dalsgaard 2006). Learning is first of all considered an active process. Learning takes place through problem-oriented activities, in which students are directed at solving a problem or achieving a goal. It is important that the individual governs his/her activities. In this respect, the socio-cultural approach emphasizes the importance of the activities of the individual. However, the approach also stresses that individual activities are *always* situated in a collective practice (Vygotsky, 1978; Brown, Collins & Duguid, 1989). Individual activities always serve an objective, which relates to an overall collective activity (Bang & Dalsgaard 2006). In other words, activities are collective (Leont’ev 1978; Engeström 1987).

This means that an individual’s activities will always be related to and gain meaning in relation to activities of other individuals. Thus, social relations (as in groups and communities) are central to learning in a socio-cultural approach. However, collective activity not only takes place within tightly knitted groups or communities. Relations between activities can be of such a sort that the individual is not aware of the activities of other people. Thus, an important objective within a learning environment is to support consciousness and awareness of activities of others. This awareness is important to support an individual’s reflection on his/her own activities in relation to others’ activities.

From this socio-cultural perspective, an individual’s awareness of activities of other individuals becomes a focal point of attention within social networks. The objective is not community-building or collaboration, but increased awareness. Supporting awareness within a learning environment will be the focus of my discussion of pedagogical potentials of social relations.

5. TRANSPARENCY AS A SPECIAL KIND OF SOCIAL INTERACTION

This brings us back to the question: which kinds of social relations support learning? Social relations that support awareness can first of all be defined negatively as relations that do not entail collaboration or discussion (two-way communication). Awareness entails a kind of relation that supports transparency.

Different kinds of relations are possible within a learning environment. I will make a distinction between relations between 1) people working together collaboratively, and 2) people engaged in similar or related activities. For instance, the distinction could be between 1) relations between students in a study group working on a joint assignment and 2) relations between individuals or study groups within the same course. Thus, the relations do not exclude one another, but are supplementary. Supporting transparency between students in the latter example will be the focus of this paper. My objective is not to reject relations that exist within groups or communities. Instead, I wish to highlight pedagogical potentials of social networking in relation to transparency.

This example is particularly relevant within a university setting, in which students are working on related projects or assignments, but not collaborating. At universities it can be difficult for students

to follow the work of other students; often, they are engaged in their own assignments. However, students *can* make use of each other's resources. Often, students are unaware of what other students are doing, and they do not necessarily make use of each other, although their work is relevant to each other. The problem is only extended within online education, where students do not meet face-to-face (Paulsen forthcoming).

The socio-cultural approach combined with the character of a university setting form a strong motive for support of transparency between students. It is important to note that this motive differs from motives for community-building and support of collaboration. Focus on support of transparency provides a different focus for technology. In the following analysis of social networking sites, the purpose is to discuss their potentials to facilitate awareness between students' activities and production.

6. SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES

Social networking sites such as MySpace, Facebook, Bebo and Ning are websites used to build online networks. In this paper, networks are distinguished from communities. Networks are defined as *individual* networks consisting of the relations of an individual. Each individual will have his/her own unique relations. People rarely have the exact same relations, and thus, people will have unique networks. Communities, on the other hand, are spaces shared by a group of people. In other words, a community is shared and collective, whereas networks are individual. The paper will focus on the concept of networks that are developed on the basis of individual relations.

The principles of social networking are not confined to social networking sites. First of all, media sharing sites such as flickr and Youtube also contain elements of social networking. The difference is that media sharing sites revolve around media materials, whereas the starting point for social networking sites is socializing. Further, social networking can also be accomplished by relations between weblogs, or by use of social awareness services such as twitter or friendfeed.

The unique characteristic of the kind of social networking that this paper will focus on, is the relationship between personalization and socialization.

7. PERSONALIZATION AND SOCIALIZATION

An interesting aspect of social interaction on social networking sites is that the starting point is the individual, the personal. This is in opposition to discussion forums and other forms of website communities, in which communication takes place in a shared forum.

The basis for social interaction in social networking sites is a personal profile, which often consists of a personal webpage on the networking site. A personal profile/webpage provides an opportunity for the user to create his/her own page with content such as pictures, videos, links, texts, etc. The personal profile can be seen as a space for individual creation and expression. A profile page is not personal in the sense that it is private; it can be made public - at least to other people in the individual's network.

The personal page provides opportunities for *personalization*; the individual can choose the look and content of the page. An important function of the personal page is that it serves as the individual's personal representation on the web. This makes social networking sites radically different than discussion groups and other community based tools. In a discussion forum you are represented by your posts only. If you do not post, you are not visible. In a social network, you are always "present" through your personal page.

The personal page provides a basis and a starting point for social networking; in other words, the starting point is the individual, the personal. On the other hand, the starting point for social interaction in discussion forums is the forum itself. The social space for interaction is developed beforehand, whereas the social network for interaction develops on the basis of the personal page. *Socialization* begins when a personal page is connected to other personal pages of other individuals. Each individual builds his/her own network of personal relations ("friends"). Thus, networks are also personal.

There are different ways of communication in social networks. You can send messages or leave comments on a personal page. However, a unique form of communication takes place through

notifications. This kind of communication means that people (or “friends”) within a network are notified whenever a personal page is modified or whenever a person performs any kind of action within the networking site. Consequently, a form of indirect communication emerges; indirect in the sense that it is not intentional.

It can be argued, then, that communication within social networking sites is a matter of awareness and transparency. The principle is that you communicate by editing, developing or updating personal services.

8. TRANSPARENCY: A PEDAGOGICAL POTENTIAL

What is the pedagogical potential of social networking? I will discuss the pedagogical potential within a university setting. Further, the starting point is the problem-oriented individual or a group working together on a joint project.

Paulsen (forthcoming) argues that transparency is important to distance education. He discusses transparency in relation to flexible education with continuous enrolment and examination. A challenge of flexible education is to get students to engage in joint work. Paulsen argues that transparency is a prerequisite for distance students to work cooperatively. Transparency means that students are visible to each other as potential partners and resources.

The same applies to campus-based universities, if the focus is to create awareness between students within a course. Students engaged in individual or group work are not necessarily aware of the activities of the other students within the course. To follow the outlined socio-cultural approach an important objective is to support an individual’s consciousness and awareness of activities of others. This can be achieved by development and use of personal tools, which first and foremost support the activities of the individual or group. That is, activities aimed at solving a problem; i.e. finding literature, writing texts, etc. *Personal* tools are the starting point. It is now possible to use the personal tools as the basis of *social* networks. Students can connect to and subscribe to personal tools of other students.

The result is a different kind of transparency than in, for instance, discussion forums. Whereas discussion forums and other tools for direct communication and collaboration focus on direct sharing, social networking can support students’ indirect sharing of resources, thoughts, ideas, productions, writings, notes, etc. This kind of sharing can provide students with insights into the workings of other students, and, thus, give them an increased consciousness and awareness of the activities of other students.

The pedagogical potential lies within developing social networks, in which students share their individual or group activities. The potential is to support transparency through a combination of personalization and socialization; sharing personal tools within social networks (Dalsgaard 2006). The web service del.icio.us is a fine example of the combination of personalization and socialization. Del.icio.us is a social bookmarking service, which enables people to collect their bookmarks on a webpage. Initially the service supports individual organization and use of bookmarks. However, the bookmarks are made available for everyone on the web, which means that they are shared. Students can use similar personal tools to organize their work, collect literature, write notes, brainstorm, develop thoughts and ideas, write assignments, etc. Sharing these tools with other students through networking supports transparency and consequently awareness among students.

9. CONCLUSION

Social networking sites are not the new Learning Management Systems. From the outlined socio-cultural approach, however, the special kind of communication and interaction is interesting and has a pedagogical potential. Following the socio-cultural approach, students’ problem-oriented and self-governed activities are important to learning. The approach emphasizes the importance of tools for construction, production, dialogue and collaboration. Therefore, from this point of view, social networking should be considered a supplement to other tools. The potential of social networking lies within transparency and the ability to create awareness between students - potentially across institutions and nations.

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