SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES: A BOON OR OPEN ACCESS TO YOUTH?

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Abstract— **Web 2.0 software is enabling learners to collaborate, interact and share ideas in new ways that parallel the ethos of the open access movement in academia. The scholarly content is becoming more readily accessible, we need to ask if it is desirable to have the same openness with regards to personal information. This paper examines current theory, research and media articles concerning two popular social networking sites: Facebook and Myspace. The conclusion is that the purported educational value of such sites is too limited and the risks are too high to justify using the applications in an educational context.**

Index Terms— **Education, Facebook, Myspace, Open Access, Privacy, Social Networking.**

I. INTRODUCTION

The growing momentum of the open access philosophy is aligned with the use of new interactive, collaborative media, by educators. There is little argument that increased availability of scholarly information will benefit students. Web 2.0 software is becoming the primary means of obtaining admission into these more open knowledge networks. There is considerable research to support the educational value of many read, write applications, such as blogging, wiki creation and virtual worlds. Conversely, their social networking cousins, Facebook and Myspace, have received a considerable amount of unfavorable press since their inception. Despite suspicion in traditional media outlets and many school districts, the

Prevailing research indicates that social networking software has innumerable benefits to learners, ranging from developing social identities to participating in informal media production. There is a distinct lack of qualitative evidence, however, to support these claims given that these network architectures are so novel. The risks, such as corrosion of privacy and potential victimization, of using these social applications in educational settings outweigh the unproven benefits.

The paper outline the advantages and disadvantages of using social networking software before analyzing future trends: Conclusions will be based on these forecasts. The focus is on the Facebook and Myspace platforms as these two networks have the dominant market share although, there are many other sites that achieve the same purpose of creating communities of shared interests, which allows users to create niche networks, or the emerging Twitter, which is gaining popularity rapidly. Facebook, Myspace, education, open access, benefits, risks, issues, news and research were used in all possible permutations.

A. Research in the Field of Social Networking

The few studies conducted in this nascent domain are surprisingly definitive: Most researchers, posit that social networking sites, specifically Myspace and Facebook, are educationally sound learning mechanisms. The overarching philosophy is that pedagogical ideals

and methods are radically shifting in light of the movement from direct transmission of knowledge models to collaborative, learner centered environments. Therefore students who are immersed in this "participatory culture" will develop the necessary tools to be successful citizens in the knowledge economy: Facebook and Myspace offer easy admission into this culture, as well as provide the opportunity for youth to express themselves and learn about the rules of each domain. Teachers need to guide learners through this process so that that there is fair, equitable access and in order to motivate students to critically analyze these new domains. The specific pedagogical benefits of social networking sites are that they involve membership in communities of learners, build the skills to operate within the rules of these new domains, expand the literacies necessary to operate in these realms, become knowledge creators, as well as consumers, and develop personal identities.

Both Facebook and Myspace offer membership into peer based learning whereby "participants feel they can both produce and evaluate knowledge and culture". Involvement in these social networks supplies opportunities to learn informally, as well as provide a gateway to more expert communities as familiarity with the domain is developed. This process is referred to as "hanging out", "messing around "which contends that each specific environment contains a complex system of behavioral expectations, cues and social practices that need to be learned in order to master these "affinity spaces".

Once a personalized page is established, participants tend to want to modify their site and integrate a variety of media into their personal domain. This experimentation allows the users of these spaces to gain familiarity with new technologies, as well as take meaningful risks and collaborate with peers to achieve the desired effect. Often Myspace users will add videos, blogs and music to the sites. Furthermore, process trains participants to engage in critical thought and seek help from useful sources. Once exploration has led to expertise, many members become expert resources in specialized fields within the community. They become revered for their mastery and willingness to help others. This in turn builds a system of recognition based on contributions to the community, which is highly motivating and personally engaging for many young people.

Another benefit of sites like Myspace is that it accustoms students to "distributed cognition" whereby they view the community, as well as its technological resources, as a complex learning tool. The notion of "collective intelligence" illustrates the collaborative, interactive, immediate and social nature of these new learning topologies. Furthermore, these settings provide feedback in the form of comments from peers. Students who learn how to pool resources and share information through social networking sites are engaging in authentic acts that resemble the way people in the work world operate.

Besides being involved in a community of peers and learners, social networking software offers youth the opportunity to develop a wide range of technical skills that will serve them well in the knowledge economy. One of the desirable qualities of Myspace is that it allows customization through a technical glitch whereby users can change their backgrounds or add scripts using imported html and cascading style sheets code. Furthermore, participants can embed code that appropriate other media, as well as make comments on other pages. There is a delicate balance between the social aspects of the platform and the technical affordances available: The page creator, for example, has to take into consideration the fact that peers will add comments that could potentially change the aesthetic lay out.

The contention that Web 2.0 technologies, such as Myspace and Facebook, are developing, as well as creating the need, for sophisticated multimodal literacy whereby users can extract meaning from a myriad of sources. The youth are required to negotiate numerous multimedia sources in order to acquire relevant information due to the growing confluence of digital content.

Essentially, students who are active participants in web culture are well versed in a variety of modes of expression, while those who still use the Internet as if it is the digital version of text are less versed in its complexity. Thus, Myspace and Facebook are excellent settings in which to practice, refine and experiment with a variety of media forms, such as blogging, tagging, appropriating code and embedding a variety of applications through mash-ups.Being part of a diverse network creates respect for multiple perspectives and forms of expression.

Another positive feature of social networking sites is that they enable users to contribute to media production. Aside from empowering those who produce their own content and developing an understanding of the nuances of the media involved, social networking platforms provide creative outlets (Greenhow, Robelia & Hughes, 2009) that will potentially lead to future innovation (Jenkins et al., 2006).

The final advantage of social networking espoused by the canon of research in this domain is that the technology enables students to explore and manage their personal identity Myspace allows students to present themselves to a public audience, often of their choice, on their own terms and in a manner that transcends their physical presence in typical social settings. While this social, yet public, development is not without peril, Teens need to have access to "networked publics" because they are an inevitable reality and they provide social validation: It is preferable to educate youth and provide them with the appropriate skills, rather than restricting access.

The use of Web 2.0 programmes matches the ideals of constructivist teaching methodologies and the open access philosophy. Such applications provide opportunities for learners to authentically interact and produce collaborative work within learning communities. Furthermore, these technologies often enable access to new "remixed" content that is more accessible and engaging to younger generations. The social networking features of Myspace and Facebook support these learning outcomes and a growing "participatory culture.

B. The Immediate Danger of Myspace and Facebook Portrayed in the Media

The general media portrayal of these two applications serves as a stark counterpoint to the limited research. A widespread search of the relevant literature reveals that there is considerable support for the social networking applications and a dearth of evidence to suggest that there are negative impacts, yet there are a multitude of newspaper articles that cast doubt about the sites" merits. The three main, but not sole, areas of concern with using social networking programmes in educational settings are the invasion of privacy, the increased risk of victimization and the informal nature of such software.

A major issue with Myspace and Facebook is the potential for privacy infringement: The notion of open access is highly appealing when it relates to scientific content or medical breakthroughs, but not the personal information of vulnerable minors. Although the site provides privacy controls that can essentially create gated, closed networks amongst friends, there is still no guarantee that unscrupulous developers could use the information.

Facebook explicitly states that they "cannot and do not guarantee that User Content you post on the Site will not be viewed by unauthorized persons". The second major problem is that information submitted to Facebook leaves an indelible digital footprint that cannot be expunged. The data could be mined and used by third parties for marketing purposes.

Facebook and Myspace are platforms that are blurring the distinctions between private and public; formal and informal, as well as professional and social. Both teachers and students need to be aware that information submitted to such networks is no longer considered their personal property. Although nearly fifty percent of teens provide false information in their profiles in order to maintain some privacy, it is not in their best interests to hide too much given their desire to connect with

peers. Furthermore, a study conducted in Australia shows that many high school students reveal some form of personal information. Many youth are creating a fully or fairly public archive of their behavior and personal information, which is increasingly being used by potential employers to screen candidates. Furthermore, there have been a number of cases in the United States where teachers have disclosed inappropriate comments or behavior, such as drug use, that has led to dismissal. The growing confluence between public and private domains will continue to erode the boundaries between students and teachers.

The second major area of concern is the risk of victimization. Many students at the K-12 level consider social networking sites to be uncontrolled areas that transcend physical boundaries with few consequences. A recent study of nine hundred and thirty five female teens indicates that one third have experienced some form of harassment ranging from posting compromising pictures to the spreading of rumors. There have also been a number of documented cases where the cyberbullying has led to suicide. The issue for educators and parents will be how to protect oneself from cyber-bullying, particularly if there is perception that social networking sites are unsupervised.

The last major area of concern is the informal nature of social networking. Facebook use is profoundly informal and often at a tangent with the official learning aims of educators". Furthermore, Facebook is tantamount to what was formerly social chatter in the halls of schools or telephone communication (2008). Another concern related to the casual nature of Facebook and Myspace is that it is replacing conventional face to face communication that is inhibiting socialization. A recent article on the Daily Telegraph online quotes neuroscientist Baroness Greenfield as saying that these forms of social networking are „"infantilizing" the minds of users, creating a generation of children who demand instant gratification" (Kahn, 2009). The same article cites a study at Ohio State University that suggests there is a powerful correlation between Facebook usage and lower grade point averages

(Kahn, 2009).

II. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The difficulty with analyzing the educational benefits of social networking sites is that it is a new development with very little empirical evidence to substantiate claims. Furthermore, based on personal review, the media depiction of these sites focuses on the negative aspects of such software; while academic research has primarily determined that such use in academic settings is favorable. Many school districts are banning or filtering the use of Facebook and Myspace due to privacy concerns, as well as the difficulty controlling these domains. It is foreseeable, however, that many businesses will take advantage of the free networking capabilities these sites provide. The main argument of experts in the field, such as is that restricting access is not the answer, but rather that educating learners with the tools to navigate through these domains is the solution.

There are plenty of other Web 2.0 programs, such as blogs, Wikis and online video production tools, which achieve the same aims of collaborative learning or "participatory culture". The risk of creating an archive of personal information is too great and there is not enough hard evidence to suggest that Facebook and Myspace have educational value?

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