Chapter 16
Using Social Networking to Enhance Sense of Community in E–Learning Courses

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ABSTRACT

This chapter provides an overview and development of sense of community and social networking; discusses the potential uses of social networking in education; and presents a case study that integrates social networking into two graduate courses for the purpose of building a sense of community, improving communications and interactions, and promoting student-centered collaboration. The construction of class social networking sites, the implementation of these networks, and their effects on the students' learning experience are examined. In addition, an analysis of feedback from students on the value of social networking in learning is included.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid technological change and proliferation of information resources are lineaments of our contemporary society. Online information and communication are changing the way instructors and learners interact within the teaching/learning process. Online teaching and learning represents a new educational paradigm. The "anytime, anywhere" accessibility of e-learning courses provide students and teachers the opportunities to work at

their own pace and at locations they are able to control (Berge, 1995; Edelson, 1998; Spiceland & Hawkins, 2002). Furthermore, as Richardson and Swan (2003) indicated, "[e-learning] allows students to reflect upon the materials and their responses before responding, unlike traditional classrooms" (p. 69). Currently, there are two main types of e-learning applications within higher education courses: (a) fully online applications in which teaching and learning activities take place entirely at an online computer-mediated communication (CMC) setting; (b) hybrid applications in which

both traditional classroom instruction and online CMC are blended (Yang & Liu, 2008). In either online or hybrid applications, online learning content is typically provided by courseware authors/instructors, structured into courses by a learning management system (LMS), and consumed by students. This approach is often driven by the needs of the institution/corporation rather than the individual learner.

While online and hybrid courses are expanding and the numbers of participants are increasing, questions are being raised on conventional LMS based e-learning. For example, researchers are asking how best to foster community among learners and their instructors who are physically separated from each other, as well as separated in time (Palloff & Pratt, 1999; Rovai, 2002a, 2002b). Such separation may increase social insecurities, communication anxieties, and feelings of disconnectedness (Jonassen, 2000; Kerka, 1996). As a result of such separations, Sherry (1996) stated that "the student becomes autonomous and isolated, procrastinates, and eventually drops out" (¶ 27). Previous studies suggest that a sense of community, which is related to connectedness and learning, is essential for an e-learning course to occur (Yang & Liu, 2008).

With the emerging Web 2.0 technologies, more opportunities and possibilities to enhance existing e-learning courses are provided. For instance, social networks are collections of Web 2.0 technologies combined in a way that help build online communities. Social networking sites are on the rise globally and are developing rapidly as technology changes with new mobile dimensions and features. These sites are changing the ways people use and engage each other utilizing the Internet (Childnet International, 2008). Today's technology enhanced students have shown growing interest in social networking sites because of the community, the content, and the activities in which they can engage in the sites. Students can share their profile information, find out what their peers think about topics of interest, share music and playlists, and exchange messages with friends. Students use social networking sites to connect daily or even hourly for social as well as educational activities. They get to know their classmates through Facebook and share their lives with others on MySpace. Students use other social networking sites like RateMyProfessors and PickAProfessor to learn about their professors and choose their classes. In addition, they share their photos on Flickr and their videos on YouTube (The New Media Consortium, 2008).

Social networking sites are changing the social fabric of colleges and universities. In its fifth study of undergraduate students and information technology, the EDUCAUSE Center for Applied Research (ECAR) investigated the use of technology by undergraduate students in American colleges and universities. The *ECAR Study of Undergraduate Students and Information Technology, 2008* analyzed the Web-based survey responses of over 27,000 freshmen and seniors at 90 four-year institutions and eight two-year institutions, as well as findings from focus group discussions. The key findings of the Social Networking Sites section of the study included:

- Over 85 percent of respondents reported using social networking sites. The striking change over the last two years was in how many respondents now use social networking sites on a daily basis, from 32.8 percent in 2006 to 58.8 percent in 2008.
- Facebook was the most commonly used social networking site (SNS) (89.3% of SNS users), with MySpace as the second choice (48.3% of SNS users). Traditional college-age respondents (18 to 24 years old) used Facebook more than MySpace. However, older respondents used MySpace more than Facebook.
- Over 55 percent of SNS users spent 5 hours or less per week on SNSs, and about

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