Chapter 42
Social Networks in the Higher Education Framework— Understanding the University as an Organization:
Inlumine, Our Study Case

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ABSTRACT

Recent studies are focusing on how social networks impact the learning process and how students organize themselves to face collaborative tasks via these networks, as well as their impact on the learning outcomes of the students. In a number of these studies, learning social aspects are analyzed, showing, among other issues of interest, that participating in social networks positively affects students' self-esteem. In this article it is shown how this applies to the university model being adopted in Europe. Nowadays, the student is limited by the class and by the restricted group of people enrolled in that same university degree. In which way can the university facilitate that students get to each other so that they can find aspects in common and therefore the set of relationships grows? This chapter shows how our university—Universidad de Almería, UAL—globalizes its campus providing access to every student, as well as how this social network is succeeding.

INTRODUCTION

The human being is inherently a social entity and as such depends on the rest of individuals of the community to develop. The human being needs to be part of a group (family, team, etc.) and the fact of not belonging to one is a handicap for the individual identity. Traditionally, the social group to which any human is attached—to naturally achieve the root of its identity—is the family. This group grows as individuals are added, not only from the family, but also from direct relatives of each individual. As the person develops and interacts, his/her group is particularized and customized with new contacts. A person then, creates a network of contacts collected from every group that this person encounters during a life cycle (work, university, etc.). The major disadvantage of these groups is that they are disjoint, for it is rare—and time consuming—to find points in common between individuals in order to build an homogeneous net.

Therefore, on one hand, we can state that the human being is a social being that tries to fit into a certain group in order to fulfill and develop its own identity. On the other hand, a social group or community becomes stronger as new members are added (especially those who are capable of outstanding), since this characteristic is attractive from the perspective of exploring new contacts. In this sense, the individual needs the group and the group is built upon the individual. This interesting symbiosis is not properly exploited due to the difficulties resulting from having to talk face-to-face to other people who is completely unknown to you.

The appearance of the Web 2.0 as a phenomenon where anyone of us can be a producer and a consumer of content has been the catalyst for online communities, where this social barrier is not a handicap to discover points in common anymore, nor to apply as a member to a certain social network. This new conception of communities turns the Internet into the necessary glue between the above mentioned two counterparts: the individual–who needs a group but has no clue how to contact it—and the group–which needs individuals but cannot figure out who might be interested. Social networks are the expected evolution of this. Their success confirms this theory. Social networks are nowadays an extremely powerful tool which may benefit you if used correctly, or be fatal if misused.

From a social perspective, a social network provides paths to make contacts, to become part of a group, and not only that, to be an outstanding member. In this way, one can attract the attention of other members. The income for those that actively participate in the community is social rather than material, but also very important. Being an outstanding member has always been a hard task. Nowadays, however, thanks to social networks, everybody can make public their opinions (what will be for sure evaluated) without necessarily knowing personally every member of the community, nor having to establish personal relationships. The group becomes stronger as the number of outstanding persons raise, and therefore the group empowers people to participate.

Social networks understood as stated above are being used by big corporations to get feedback from WIPs–Web Important Persons–about their products. Just consider that when you need a service, you first ask your colleagues for advice. Social networks work the same. A WIP influences community member's decisions. As being a WIP is a privilege, everyone in the community would like to be one. This is precisely the income which they can get by participating. However, measuring the impact of each individual is a hard and subjective task (Agarwal, N. & Liu, H. & Tang, L. & Yu, P. (2008 February).)

Corporations use social networks also to get feedback information on the competence and recruit future candidates to fill positions in the company, among other things. Social networks are part of the corporation business intelligence, they are used even for the Human Resource depart-

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