Social networking tools in a university setting:
# A student's perspective

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ABSTRACT

As Professors, we are challenged to reach ever-changing cohorts of college students as they flow through our classes and our lives. Technological advancements happen daily and we need to decide which, if any, to incorporate into our classrooms. Our students constantly check Facebook, Twitter, MySpace and other online social networks. Should we be posting course materials to these sites, or using them as communication vehicles? We asked 236 students in two states if they believe there is a use for these sites in the learning process. The answer was a definite NO. Students want to keep their social roles and their student roles separate.

Keywords: business education, social networking, classroom technology, Facebook, Twitter
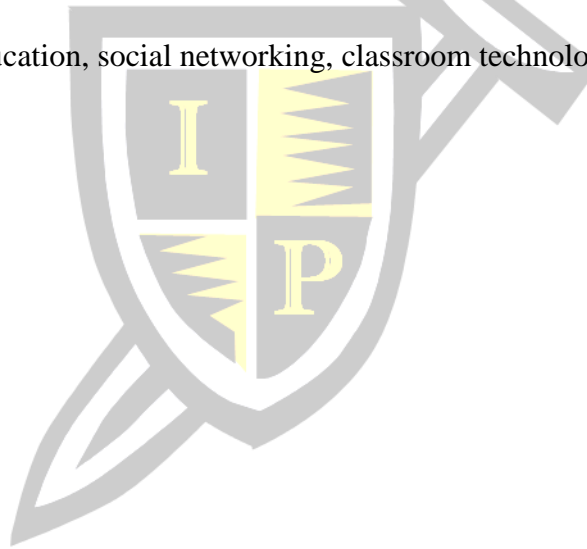
INTRODUCTION

Much has been made of how rapid advances in technology have changed the way we learn and communicate. In terms of personal interaction, social networking tools such as MySpace, Facebook, Twitter, Texting, and YouTube have become common methods of communication for young consumers and they are gaining interest and acceptance from consumers of all ages. We are also seeing technology change the way formal learning takes place with laptops in the classroom, iPhone applications, and online course offerings. It can no longer be argued that these technologies do not exist or that they are not widely used. However, questions that remain unanswered are, do these technologies actually enhance learning and do students believe that they are appropriate forms of communication for use in a University setting.

There is absolutely no doubt that social networks are widely used. It has been reported that at least 75% of 18 to 24 year olds use some form of social network and that 57% of 25 to 34 year olds also use these tools. After the age of 35 the percent of users drops to under 30% (Lenhart, 2009). Interestingly, Lenhart reports that approximately 35% of adults have posted a profile on a social networking source which is three times higher than just three years ago. Lenhart further reports that these sources are primarily used for personal purposes such as keeping in touch with friends (89%), making plans with friends (57%), and making new friends (49%). It is also important to note that approximately 60% of adult social network users restrict access so that only their friends can see what is posted.

While it is quite clear that these social networks are commonly used for social contacts, it is much less clear as to whether they are seen as being appropriate methods of communication in a professional or University setting. Rather than being seen as an acceptable source of information, these networking sites may well be shunned by the exact audience that is being targeted. For example, it has been reported that numerous companies are now looking up potential new hires on social networking sites and are eliminating some of those applicants based upon what the applicants have posted in their profiles. These postings were based on the misguided assumption that the posted information is private and are only being shared with friends (Finder, 2006). It would seem logical to assume that very few job applicants, or students, would want potential employers or Professors viewing their private postings.

University Professors are now exploring the in-class use of text messaging (Cheung, 2008), Twitter (Fernando, 2008), Facebook (Scissors, 2007), and iPhone (Kharif, 2008). Again, the question that arises is, are these useful learning tools or simply distractions being implemented in the name of learning? As Universities rush to keep up with these technological trends, it would seem prudent to slow down and ask if the targets of these sites (Students) wish to sign up with a University or Department networking site and share their personal profiles in a much more public fashion or do they view this as an invasion of their privacy? To this end, this study examines the students' perspective of the possible in-class use of Facebook, Twitter and iPhones, as well as examining student perceptions of Universities and Departments using social networking sites as a form of communication.

BACKGROUND

Social Networking Sites and the University

As noted earlier, a significant portion of the U.S. population has posted a personal profile on some type of social networking site. Swift (2009) estimates that social networking sites have approximately 100 million users in the U.S. while Facebook reports having over 350 million users worldwide. Swift also points out that the users of these sites are becoming more diverse with approximately 11% being African-American, 9% being Latino, and 6% being Asian. Shapira (2009) also confirms this high usage rate as he indicates that approximately 85% of 18 to 34 year old internet users logged on to Facebook, MySpace, or Twitter in August of that year and that 84% of 18-29 year olds check their networking site at least once a week. However, just because these sites are used on a large scale basis for personal use does not mean that they necessarily lend themselves to more professional use. So, do these sites lend themselves to use by a University? The answer seems to be yes and no. While Universities are using these sites as a method for a new student to meet their roommate before arriving at the University (Scissors, 2007) they are also finding that this may create as many problems as they solve. Students and parents may not like what they see or read on the networking sites and request a change in room assignment. Not everyone in the University setting is joining the rush to incorporate these sites into their classes. Flinders (2008) found that in a study of 1500 teachers, approximately half indicated that they believed that networking sites served as a distraction and had no academic benefit. Clearly not all students are in favor of using social networking sites in a University setting as Jabr (2008) reports that one-third of the students sampled indicated that faculty should not be allowed access to their social networking sites such as Facebook as it could be an invasion of their personal privacy. However, it is interesting to note that Jabr also found when instructors did use Facebook and disclosed information about their personal lives, their students indicated that they were more motivated and comfortable in the classroom. Madden (2007) also reports that younger adults find it strange for older adults to be accessing networking sites and even more concerning that companies (potential employers) are accessing these sites to view their personal profiles. In an effort to combat this uneasiness, Facebook has recently announced that it is testing a new system that allows one to select who is allowed to view postings (MacMillan, 2009). While it is very clear that networks such as Facebook and MySpace are widely used social networking tools, it seems equally clear that these sites are thought of as a personal communication tools rather than professional tools and face significant resistance when it comes to sharing private information with potential employers or professors within a university.

Based upon this literature, our first research question is: Do students see social networking sites as tools to be used in the classroom or are these sites seen as being for social use only?

Social Technology and the University

While the social networking sites have gotten a great deal of attention, it is Twitter that seems to be making some headway into the University setting. Miners (2009) indicates that this tool is now being used by college professors as a method of interacting with students in large classrooms where the traditional question and answer system may not be effective. Miners further found that professors are using Twitter accounts to alert their students of world events in

real time. Conversely, Miners found some who criticized Twitter as a tool that hinders writing skills as it limits students to 140 character statements. Not all would agree with this criticism as Twitter is being used in a writing class at Middlebury College with the justification that Twitter gives students "a chance to explore hypertext creative nonfiction, integrating image and sound in their writing and to play around with blogging and digital storytelling" (Fernando, 2008 p.9).

YouTube is often thought of as being a tool used for entertainment but it too is making inroads into University classes. Recently, a professor at Pitzer College offered a course entitled "Learning from YouTube" in which students were required to watch videos on YouTube, post comments, and make video posts of their own (Fernando, 2008).

iPhones are also making inroads into the University setting. For example, Abilene Christian University gave out iPhones to approximately two thirds of their incoming freshmen class in 2008 with the expectation that these iPhones would be used for discussion purposes, as well as, accessing virtual handouts and podcasts during class sessions (Kharif, 2008). Kharif further notes that providers of these phones suggest that they can be used for taking quizzes, checking schedules, or perhaps even replacing the use of laptops. Cheung (2008) also believes that phones and specifically the use of text messaging can replace pencil and paper testing as students are now able to submit responses to quizzes and exams via text messaging which can be downloaded to a spreadsheet for grading and then have the grade returned by text message. Text messaging is also replacing traditional mail to more quickly advise students of their acceptance into Universities as this technique is much faster and widely accepted (Binham, 2007).

Based upon this literature, our second research question is: Do students see social communication technology such as Twitter and iPhone as being appropriate tools for a classroom setting?

METHOD

An online survey was conducted using Survey Monkey with students at two Universities, a mid-size campus in the Southeast and a large campus in the Midwest. A total of 236 students completed the survey. The demographics of the sample are presented in Table 1 (Appendix). Students were offered extra credit for completing the survey at the end of the semester. The survey contained attitude measures of a number of technology tools in classroom usage. This paper focuses on student attitudes toward the use of social networking sites in classroom education. There were no significant differences in responses based upon the student's gender, age, location or ethnic background.

RESULTS

As noted earlier, the first research question considered was: Do students see social networking sites as tools to be used in the classroom or are these sites seen as being for social use only? The data shown in Table 2 (Appendix) rather clearly shows that students do not see social networking sites as appropriate tools to be used in a University setting. A clear majority of respondents (73.2%) indicated that they did not believe that Facebook was an appropriate method for professors to use in posting course information and communicating with students while only 26.8% agreed that it was an appropriate tool. While these responses very clearly indicated that students were not receptive to the use of Facebook as a means of communication, it was still unclear as to why they did not find such a commonly used source appropriate. The

respondents were then asked an open ended question - How could Facebook be used in the classroom? The following statements are representative samples of these responses.

"I think it's inappropriate to use Facebook in the classroom. It's a networking social site that should be for social networking, not school stuff. That's what Blackboard is for!"

"I don't think that Facebook should be used in the classroom. Students already find themselves getting off task without having their school work integrated into Facebook."

"What? Facebook is for networking. I don't see that it has a use in class unless it is internet marketing, social media marketing, or something to do with advertising."

"I don't think it's a good idea to use Facebook for classes. It is a social network; students that are in college should be responsible enough to check email. They should not have to be reminded with Facebook."

"A networking site should not be used and is in no way conducive to learning."
"I guess Facebook could be used as another communication tool, but not everyone has a Facebook account. I don't and don't intend to ever get one. It's for some people, but not for all. We use Blackboard and that is a site that is through the school and is structured for our student needs and that is good enough."

"I don't think it should be; I think that's for the college student generation to stay connected, not the entire college faculty and staff. Facebook with the older generation has gotten out of hand in my opinion.

"I would hate using Facebook in the classroom, and I don't think many students would be cool with adding their professors on Facebook especially if they had inappropriate things on their Facebook pages."

A very few positive comments were posted. The following are representative of these comments.

"Reminders could be posted via Facebook. Facebook chat could be used at various times to communicate with other students and the teacher. Groups for the class can be formed as a central location for information, and events could be made to post upcoming assignments and status updates could serve as reminders."

"Professors could post upcoming events for class on Facebook, send reminders for tests, and send links to course information. However, all of this can be accomplished through school email."

"I think that Facebook is something that students would check more often than their own email."

The vast majority of student comments tended to be negative and indicated a clear dislike for the use of Facebook as a means of communication between the University (professors) and the student. Based upon these responses it seems safe to conclude that students do not see social

networking sites as being appropriate for use by the University or department and do feel that these sites are primarily for social exchanges. Thus, the answer to research question one is that these students believe that social networking sites are for social use only.

With respect to research question two, the use of Twitter was even more negative then the use of Facebook. Table 2 shows that only 15.5% of respondents believed that Professors should use Twitter as a method of communication while an overwhelming majority (84.5%) indicated that it should not be used. Use of the iPhone was almost evenly split with 49.1% indicating that they did believe there was an educational use for the iPhone and 50.9% indicating that they did not believe the iPhone was appropriate for use in the classroom. Not surprisingly the open ended responses were about evenly split as well. Most of the negative comments were generally a result of students not owning an iPhone and they didn't believe they should be required to purchase one for a particular class. Conversely, there were a variety of positive comments concerning iPhone usage. The following are representative of these comments.

"Having lectures recorded and posted on iTunes for students to download and listen to in their cars and other convenient places to reinforce the professor's points."

"Post things on iPhone or for internet classes used as a way to watch lectures on the go."

"The iPhone can help people use the internet or have access to anything obtainable on the web. It could be helpful in research and checking blackboard, but it shouldn't be used during class time, because it could be distracting."

It was interesting to note that a large percentage of respondents indicated that either they did not own an iPhone and that it would be unfair to those not owning the iPhone if it were used in a classroom setting. A number of respondents indicated that they did own an iPhone but they too believed that it would not be fair to those who did not have the same technology.

Perhaps the most interesting responses were that 57.5% of the responding students indicated that they think that these technologies are more fads than valuable learning tools in the classroom. This number may well indicate that Universities are chasing a fad rather than actually providing the student with a useful learning tool. Again, based upon the information shown in Table 2, it seems rather clear that students don't see these tools such as Twitter, iPhone, and Texting as being appropriate for University use and that in some cases the technology is not only undesired but also seen as being intrusive.

CONCLUSION

As Professors, our jobs involve being able to reach ever-changing cohorts of college students. From Gen Y to Gen Next, to Millenials, whatever we call them they are unique and changing in their learning styles. Technological advances are happening daily and these students are getting more and more sophisticated in their use of these tools. Not that long ago, PowerPoint presentations were all the rage in college classrooms, then clickers, and now the use of texting and Twitter are becoming more common. What is next? It was this generation who made Facebook the company it is today. These students have embraced social networking as a key part of their lives. While this phenomenon is amazing, this paper sought to answer the more basic questions about these advances. Do students really want their Professors to use these types of tools in their classrooms? If students are on these sites constantly, wouldn't it be simpler and

easier to post classroom materials to social networking pages? This project started as a result of a Dean demanding faculty to use these new tools in the classroom. However, from the results of our admittedly simple survey, students do NOT want to "friend" their Professors and have their online social networking profiles available for faculty and other students (who are not their friends) to see. They would prefer to keep their social lives and their school lives separate with respect to the world of social networking. As faculty, what we need to learn from this, is that not all technologies are appropriate for classroom use and the latest, greatest fad may not present the best way to interact with this generation of students.

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