Understanding students' perceptions of the benefits of online social networking use for teaching and learning

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A B S T R A C T

The recent popularity of social technologies has motivated some university lecturers to use them for Online Social Networking (OSN) educational activities. These technologies have enormous potential to enhance the teaching and learning experience. However, there have been limited studies assessing how to effectively use social technologies and what the impacts are on students' learning experience, particularly with regard to their value in enhancing interactions. This paper focuses on students’ experiences with using OSN for student–student and student–lecturer interactions. A total of nine focus group discussions with 46 students were held in Malaysian and Australian universities. A thematic analysis revealed that students identified a number of positive outcomes from using OSN to interact with each other and with their lecturers. The findings contribute to current understanding about how students leverage social technologies to enhance interaction among themselves, with their lecturers, and with the content of the course.

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1. Introduction

The emergence and popularity of social technologies in the past few years has motivated some lecturers to appropriate these technologies for educational activities in higher education. Social or Web 2.0 technologies include social networking sites, blogs, microblogs, and wikis. In this paper “online social networking” (OSN) educational activities are defined as the use of appropriated social technologies to facilitate a range of teaching and learning activities in collaborative settings. A previous definition of OSN offered by Boyd (2007) stated that online social networking is a mediated public characterised by four properties: persistence, searchability, replicability and invisible audiences. This paper focuses on OSN educational activities; therefore we do not use Boyd’s general definition but focus on what OSN means in the context of higher education. OSN encompasses the technologies commonly known as social networking tools, but is more broadly applied in this paper to include a range of social technologies such as blogs, wikis, and other tools commonly known as “Web 2.0”. Online social networking can also be distinguished from the social networking activities that occur offline (i.e., face-to-face). In the literature the terms social media and social technologies are often interchangeably. Lowedahl (2011) defined social media as web environments where user-created content is aggregated, presented and shared. The term “social technologies” is used throughout this paper and includes technologies typically labelled as social media as well as other tools that enable collaboration, such as online discussion forums.

Within the context of higher education, social technologies can be used to support teaching and learning through OSN educational activities. Some examples of OSN educational activities are content generating, sharing, interacting, and collaborating. Content generating occurs when social technologies are used by students to easily create their own content, opinions and support across networks of users. For example, blogs can be used as reflective diaries and to develop online communities of practice (Osman & Koh, 2013; Sandars & Schroter, 2007). Students are able to share blogs or publish their work and ideas on a public space for others to view and download. By example, multimedia files can be shared on file sharing websites such as Flickr, YouTube or Slideshare, and social bookmarking sites allow users to bookmark certain websites or tag keywords for users with similar interests to peruse (Gao, 2013; Lockyer & Patterson, 2008; Murray, 2008). Social technologies also support interactions among students by allowing them to actively participate in a discussion. They can leave comments on a blog or discussion forum and ask for more detailed explanations, add someone as a friend and initiate communication by leaving a message (Irwin, Ball, Desbrow, & Leveritt, 2012; McLoughlin & Lee, 2007; Munoz & Towner, 2009). Social technologies can be used by students to collaboratively learn how to solve problems with members of a group, or to organise collaborative learning and study groups (Gray, Annabell, &

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By collaborating, students extend their formal and informal interactions by establishing active communication with their peers, with the aim of working towards particular outcomes or producing deliverables, in both online and offline modes.

Many researchers have discussed the broad learning benefits of using social technologies in higher education (e.g., McLoughlin & Lee, 2008; Schroeder, Minocha, & Schneider, 2010) and there have been many published case studies of successful implementations of OSN activities in higher education (e.g., Amador & Amador, 2014; Bennett, Bishop, Delgarno, Waycott, & Kennedy, 2012; Hosny & Fatima, 2012; Irwin et al., 2012; Lee, 2014; Pursel & Xie, 2014). Student perspectives are often considered in evaluations of specific OSN activities (e.g., Amador & Amador, 2014; Bennett et al., 2012) but detailed analyses of student perspectives covering a range of learning settings are less common (see Lee, 2014 for an exception). In addition, although social technologies are promoted as fostering collaborative learning and increasing interactions between students, little is known about how students feel about the interactivity benefits of social technologies. Studies that have examined OSN interactions have typically focused on the form of those interactions, rather than students’ perceptions (e.g., Kuo, Walker, Schroder, & Belland, 2014). Understanding how students feel about using social technologies to interact with each other or with their lecturers can help inform future implementations of OSN activities in higher education; tailoring educational activities to suit student preferences is likely to increase student engagement.

This paper aims to examine students’ perceptions about using social technologies to interact with other students and lecturers for university coursework, drawing on focus group discussions with students from various universities and disciplines. The paper is organised as follows. The next section describes the literature review on the topic of OSN use in higher education and focuses on the benefits of OSN for interactions. This is followed by a description of the empirical data collection and analysis process. The findings from a thematic analysis of student focus group discussions are then presented, followed by a discussion of the implications of the findings for understanding students’ experiences of using OSN to enhance interaction in higher education. The paper concludes with the contributions, limitations and suggestions for future research.

2. Social technologies in higher education: benefits and limitations

Contemporary social technologies are used by hundreds of millions of users, available for free, and are engaging and fun to use, making them appropriate to be harnessed for teaching and learning and in particular to enhance social interactions (Brown, 2010; Hamid, Waycott, Kurnia, & Chang, 2014; Hemmi et al., 2009; Seaman & Tinti-Kane, 2013; Selwyn, 2012). The increasingly ubiquitous access, ease of use, functionality, and flexibility of social technologies have made them appealing as flexible learning tools to be adopted in higher education (Brown, 2010; Schroeder et al., 2010). Some authors have suggested that social technologies support constructivist approaches to learning and have the potential to socialise online learning to a greater extent than previously seen in traditional learning environments (McLoughlin & Lee, 2008; Schroeder et al., 2010). Social technologies can support flexibility in learning processes and allow for easy publication, sharing of ideas and re-use of study content, and commentaries. They also support links to relevant resources in information environments that are managed by the students and lecturers themselves (Brown, 2010; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). In this section we discuss the learning benefits of using social technologies in higher education that have been detailed in previous research, followed by a review of studies that have examined the use of social technologies in particular university settings, focusing on Australian and Malaysian contexts.
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