



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



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ABSTRACT

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 used 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 or publish their work and ideas on a public space for others to view and download. For 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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Kennedy, 2010; Hemmi, Bayne, & Land, 2009; Kane & Fichman, 2009). 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, Dalgarno, 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.

2.1. Learning benefits and limitations of social technologies in higher education

The extant literature has revealed several benefits of OSN for educational purposes. These include its use in improving students' interaction (Crook, Fisher, Graber, Harrison, & Lewin, 2008; Odom, 2010); enhancing learning motivation and experience (Chen, Hwang, Wu, Huang, & Hsueh, 2011; Crook et al., 2008; Hosny & Fatima, 2012); and offering personalised course materials (Griffith & Liyanage, 2008; Racthman & Firpo, 2011). In addition, some researchers argue that OSN educational activities are valuable for developing students' collaborative skills (Tay & Allen, 2011) where the students use social technologies that are appealing to them (Ellison, 2007; Hall & Hall, 2010). In some direct instances, the use of OSN has contributed to higher scores (Pursel & Xie, 2014) and better efficacy or mastery of task (Tower, Latime, & Hewitt, 2014). OSN educational activities may increase students' participation in the classroom, particularly among quieter students. Students can reduce their anxiety levels by using social technologies, rather than raising questions out loud in front of their peers (Wheeler, Yeomans, & Wheeler, 2008).

Further, through the use of social technologies such as blogs, wikis, and social networking sites, students are more likely to become active participants in producing their own knowledge (Preece & Shneiderman, 2009). Social technologies allow students to express themselves as they are given the freedom to publish their work online via blogs and wikis. Learning to use social technologies can further boost students' motivation and encourage their attention to detail, resulting in an overall improved quality of work. A study by Rifkin, Longnecker, Leach, Davis, and Ortia (2009) indicated that when students publish their work online for multiple audiences, their work is mostly original, interesting and engaging for others to see leading to a more positive assessment from their peers and lecturers.

Pertaining to the limitations of OSN use, Hamid, Kurnia, Waycott, and Chang (2011) reported some concerns raised by the students. These concerns include time management issues, lack of ICT skills faced by some students, and limited technical infrastructure in some higher learning institutions. In addition, using social technologies in higher education makes students' work visible to others which can be motivating, but can also present challenges, such as students fearing others will copy their work and the need for lecturers to educate students about being careful when presenting their work in an online environment (Waycott, Sheard, Thompson, & Clerehan, 2013).

2.2. Evaluations of social technologies in specific learning settings

A number of researchers have examined the use of specific social technologies in particular discipline settings in various regions (e.g., Alam, 2008; Bennett et al., 2012; Irwin et al., 2012; Kabilan, Ahmad, & Abidin, 2010; Zeeng, Robbie, Adams, & Hutchison, 2009). In this paper we examine students' perspectives on the use of social technologies to support interactions in courses that have been taught face-to-face in Malaysian and Australian universities. Therefore, this review focuses on studies conducted in these countries.

Firstly, Alam (2008) explored the use of wikis and blogs for increasing student engagement and interaction across three universities in Australia. Feedback from students based on their experiences of using these social technologies included positive experiences in their interactions with the lecturers through blogs and comments (Alam, 2008). Zeeng et al. (2009) reported on the successful implementation of Flickr, a photo sharing technology, in a first-year photography subject within a design education programme in one Australian university. The success of the use of Flickr was later expanded to create a dynamic, global classroom, introducing students to international perspectives, and to partnerships with another university in Australia and one in the United States.

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