Using a social networking site for experiential learning: Appropriating, lurking, modeling and community building

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ABSTRACT

With social networking sites playing an increasingly important role in today's society, educators are exploring how they can be used as a teaching and learning tool. This article reports the findings of a qualitative case study about the integration of *Ning* into a blended course. The study draws on the perspectives of the students, the instructor and an outside observer to explore the intended and unintended outcomes of *Ning* use. As intended by the instructor, the site effectively served as an information repository and the blogs and discussion forums promoted reflection and review of each other's work. Unintended outcomes included community building and modeling, both of which are types of vicarious interaction that fall into the category of pedagogical lurking.

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1. Introduction

With blogs, wikis and social networking sites (SNSs), the Internet has entered the new era of Web 2.0, which goes beyond linking information to connecting people (Warschauer, 2009). *Facebook* and other SNSs are becoming more prevalent in educational environments, with educators exploring how such tools can be used for teaching and learning (Schwartz, 2009; Terris, 2009). Social networking sites differ from and provide an alternative to proprietary course management systems such as *Blackboard*, since SNSs emphasize community and collaboration. They are designed to combine individual profile pages with group interaction tools, such as chat, blogs, and discussion forums. Many existing SNSs are free and can be incorporated by teachers without additional cost, which is why they can be particularly useful when teaching courses on technology integration in the classroom. Through the use of experiential learning techniques students themselves learn the computer-mediated communication (CMC) technologies they will eventually use in their own teaching. This paper describes the use of a publicly available SNS, *Ning*, and its integration into a blended university course on computer-assisted language learning (CALL).

Our study is informed by a reflective practice stance, more specifically a retrospective reflection-on-action perspective (Schön, 1983). Framed as a case study (Merriam, 1998), we drew upon data from three perspectives (that of the course instructor, the students, and an outside observer) to explore how the *Ning* site served as an online presence for the class, redefined the meaning of interaction, and modeled the potential of technology to support language learning. By including the students' as well as an outsider's perspective, we do not focus exclusively on the teacher, a shortcoming of the reflective practice stance identified by Kumaravadivelu (2003). We integrated these three perspectives as follows. Dr. Arnold, the instructor of the course, described and reflected upon the context of the course and articulated her design decisions for using the *Ning* tool. In this article, she presents her descriptions and reflections in her own voice, using the first person. The students' perspectives were obtained through interview data collected by Dr. Paulus, an instructional designer with 11 years of experience using and researching computer-mediated communication in language and other teaching environments. She analyzed the content and structure of the *Ning* site to provide an outside perspective on what was happening in the class. Both Dr. Arnold and Dr. Paulus collaborated on iterations of the data analysis to answer the research questions. Together these three perspectives — instructor, student, and outside observer — shed light on the potential for SNSs to support learning.

2. Conceptual framework

From a pedagogical stance, CMC tools offer a variety of benefits, such as an increased potential for student-to-student and student-to-instructor interaction outside of traditional class time (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000). In distance learning environments, this may lead to a greater sense of community which in turn can motivate learners and decrease attrition rates (Rovai, 2003). In hybrid, or blended, learning environments, however, students' sense of community may come primarily from the face-to-face meeting time.

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Providing additional venues for interaction is especially valuable for foreign language learning, where exposure to the target language is often limited. CMC can provide authentic contextualized language input beyond the confines of the classroom (Luke, 2006). Chat, email and other forms of electronic communication can serve as a space for meaningful interaction that promotes cultural, pragmatic and linguistic competence by allowing learners to use the language with native speakers or other learners (Abrams, 2006; Lomicka, 2006).

Given its pedagogical potential for language instruction, future language teachers, like the participants of our study, need to be able to make informed decisions about appropriate CMC implementation. This is one reason CMC has been integrated into many teacher training programs. Electronic discussions, for example, are a valuable tool for teacher development because they can encourage information exchange, collaboration, reflection and problem solving (Arnold & Ducate, 2006).

For many language teachers, the decision whether and how to use CALL, including CMC, is no longer based solely on their personal preference but influenced by curricular requirements or employer demands (Kessler, 2006). This growing pressure further emphasizes the need to provide teacher candidates with adequate training in how to make effective use of technology. Recognizing the importance of such training, teacher educators have debated not only which skills and knowledge are necessary (Compton, 2009; Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, 2009) but also the format of such training (Hubbard, 2008; Hubbard & Levy, 2006). To help future teachers understand the connection between theory and practice, as well as facilitate the application of their new skills and knowledge in the classroom, some scholars have called for training that explicitly connects with realistic teaching contexts: "Clearly, CALL teacher education must be more like the contexts in which such language instruction takes place" (Egbert, 2006, p. 168). There are several pedagogical approaches to achieve this, such as project based learning, situated learning, and experiential learning.

Experiential learning is "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience" (Kolb, 1984, p. 41). According to the four-stage model of experiential learning, learners engage in reflection and observation based on concrete experiences in order to synthesize them into abstract concepts, which then form the basis for active experimentation (Kolb, Boyatzis, & Mainemelis, 2001). The course described here was designed to promote experiential learning by allowing students to experience CMC as learners (concrete experience) and reflect on these experiences (reflection). Students were asked to draw on both of these course components when formulating their personal philosophies about if and how to use CALL in their own teaching (abstract concept), which, it was hoped, would inform their future teaching (active experimentation).

The class investigated for this study used several CMC tools through a SNS. While instructional uses of CMC have been investigated extensively, research on the educational potential of SNSs is still in its infancy. As Mitchell (2009) described, students' self-motivated use of *Facebook* can promote language learning in a variety of ways. The idea of creating, expressing and experimenting with identities, a central aspect of SNSs, seems to have significant pedagogical potential (McBride, 2009), especially within the methodological framework of critical language learning (Halvorsen, 2009). As described by Blattner and Fiori (2009), *Facebook* can be used for language instruction to promote socio-pragmatic competence. Observing groups on *Facebook* can raise learners' awareness of linguistic issues such as regional language variation as well as provide opportunities to put pragmatic knowledge to use while engaging in communicative acts.

As described above, social networking can be an informal (Mitchell, 2009; Stevenson & Liu, 2010) or formal learning tool in blended or online environments. The role of social networking tools in blended environments has been investigated less frequently than in fully distant environments. How and why faculty and students use SNSs as part of blended environments warrants further study. This study is intended to contribute to our understanding of how SNSs can be used to support blended learning environments, as well as model technology integration practices to future teachers. More specifically, we wanted to investigate the following research questions:

1. How did the students in this blended course use the *Ning* site?
2. What were student perceptions of *Ning*?
3. How did the modeling of *Ning* use impact students' plans to use CMC and/or SNS tools in their future teaching?
4. How were the instructor goals for the use of the site met?

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design and data collection

A qualitative case study (Merriam, 1998) was our strategy to explore this blended learning environment. Merriam (1998) emphasizes that qualitative design is emergent with a recursive, dynamic process of data collection and analysis. After receiving IRB approval from both our institutions, the following data sources were gathered: a student questionnaire, the content of the *Ning* site, and student interviews. All data collection instruments are available upon request.

The questionnaire was administered to the students at the end of the quarter and gathered the following information: (1) demographics (age, gender, native language and undergraduate or graduate status), (2) type of previous language teaching experience (language and level), and (3) previous experience learning languages with instructional technology (language and technologies.) Further, to assess their level of technology use, participants were asked to take an online quiz available from the Pew Internet and American Life Project, which categorizes respondents as one of ten types on their technology user taxonomy (Horrigan, 2007).

After grades were entered at the end of the term, all content from participating students was downloaded from the *Ning* site for analysis. This included nine member/profile pages, 14 wall comments, 143 discussion forum posts, 81 blog posts, and three group pages (with nine comments/posts). Students' position papers were also downloaded for analysis. Completed towards the end of the course, this assignment required students to draw on information from the professional literature as well as their own experiences in the course to formulate their personal philosophy of the role CALL can play to promote language learning.

All participants were invited to participate in a one hour interview. Four participants (Ruth, Tsukiko, Gary and Karen) agreed to be interviewed. To allow students to speak openly about their opinions, Dr. Paulus, the outside observer, conducted the interviews. Since she was not located in the same state as the participants, synchronous instant messenger tools were used for the interviews. Participants chose the tool they were most comfortable with, and a variety of tools (Skype, Yahoo and Gmail) were used. These text-based interviews were automatically archived for analysis.

3.2. Participants

Eight of the ten students consented to participate in the research study. Pseudonyms are used throughout this paper. As illustrated in Table 1, two students were male and the rest were female. Their ages ranged from 20 to 26, and two were non-native speakers of English. Four were undergraduates and four were graduates. They had a range of previous teaching experiences and experiences learning with technology. While four participants were "omnivores" (heavy users)