

THE VALUE OF SOCIAL NETWORKING IN ICT. A NEW ZEALAND PERSPECTIVE

Vicki-Lee TYACKE

Nurse Education Team

Universal College of Learning

New Zealand

vickilee.tyacke@ucol.ac.nz

Abstract: In 2010 The Neilson Media Group (2010) found that 70% of New Zealanders surveyed had a Facebook persona. With this level of engagement with the online social networking space why are New Zealand educators not consistently utilizing Facebook as an integral e-learning tool for students to discuss course content and collaborate on their assessments? Particularly as, international research has found that social network sites encourage students to collaborate with each other, as well as adding value to, and enhancing the contextualization of, their knowledge. While this article acknowledges the ongoing criticism associated with the use of social networking spaces as an e-learning tool, the focus is to analyse the positive aspects of the use of Facebook in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) education to engage with our target audiences. From this position this article has identified educators need to be involved with ICT policy development and review to ensure policies are robust, value based, and focused on growing responsible digital citizens to encourage this engagement. Furthermore, to achieve these values based policies there needs to be a focus for New Zealand educators producing scholarly outputs that capture a New Zealand cultural perspective in relation to the incentives, and barriers, of integrating social networking into the classroom.

THE VALUE OF SOCIAL NETWORKING IN ICT

Facebook dominates the New Zealand online social networking space. In 2010 research undertaken by The Neilson Media Group (2010) found that 82% of those surveyed identified Facebook as their preferred social media site, compared to 30% in 2007, and 70% of New Zealanders have a Facebook persona. With this level of engagement it is easy to appreciate that today's students are generally comfortable in the social networking environment. The focus for this report will be to explore how should educators harness this level of comfortableness and utilize social networking spaces, specifically Facebook, to enhance the learning experience of New Zealand students between the ages of 15-24 years.

While Facebook has traditionally required an affiliation with an educational institution, in the USA it remains the most preferred social networking site amongst college students with as many as 90% of all college students having a Facebook persona (Educause Learning Initiative, 2007). There are many commentators, including Cain (2008), who discuss a number of criticisms that are currently associated with the use of social networking spaces as an e-learning tool. These ongoing criticisms can be used as a way of demeaning the value of social networking spaces in ICT education, resulting in educators not utilizing every available opportunity to engage with their target audience.

Despite an awareness of these criticisms, there is an increasing interest in using social networks in education and Aronowitz (2009) identifies that there are two levels of interest at play here. There is the concept of expressed interest, where the educator indicates interest, which is rarely followed up with active interest. It is this lack of active interest that is having an impact on the uptake of social networking as an e-learning tool. The use of social networks in education has been shown to create a casual place of learning where students are encouraged to express their own thoughts, within the boundaries of the public charter which addresses appropriate participation guidelines. Through this participation, an online community is created where students experience a sense of connection with the educational institution and their peers. Cain (2008) believes that this connection may have a positive impact on student retention. A view supported by Einspar (2007) who found that when students felt a sense of connection with their learning environments, they tended to be more academically successful. This has direct relevance to the New Zealand Tertiary Education Sector and the current performance linked funding model driving the rationalization of tertiary funding, as well as the increasing focus on programme completion rates.

Furthermore, social network spaces encourage students to collaborate with each other and have been found to provide added value to, and the enhanced contextualization of, their knowledge. In 2007 the National School Boards Association (2007) completed a survey of American youth between the ages of 12-17. They found that of the 96% of students with internet access engaged with social networking, and 60% of these students were using networking tools to discuss class content and collaboration on class projects. Research has also identified that outside of the classroom Facebook is not limited to leisure activities. It appears to be utilized by students as a natural social activity and 54% of their interactions on Facebook are with their classmates (Cain, 2008). From a New Zealand perspective the 2010 Social Media Report has identified that 90% of people aged 15-24 engage with Facebook frequently (Neilson Media Research, 2010) and in the context of engaging with the target audience to discuss class focused content Facebook in New Zealand is an untapped e-learning resource.

There are a number of factors that contribute to the underutilization of Facebook. Educators observe students using collaborative technology every day and appreciate the need to incorporate ICT into the teaching and learning process (edWeb.net, MCH Strategic Data & MMS Education, 2009). Many students have access to Smartphones which enables them to access Facebook remotely. This moves social networking away from computers and into the classroom and according to Educause Learning Initiative Facebook has the status of an “always on” application (2007, ¶ 8). There is an opportunity to harness the potential of Facebook to become a channel for educationally focused dialogue and a preferred destination for students to learn. An issue that flows on from this recognition is educators compare their level of technological competence to their technologically savvy students and they perceive themselves to be technologically illiterate. However, Educause Learning Initiative (2006) would argue that any technology that is able to capture the attention of a significant portion students “offers opportunities for educators to understand the elements of social networking that students find so compelling and to incorporate those elements into teaching and learning” (¶ 9).

In an age of information literacy, there are many compelling reasons why Facebook should be integrated into the classroom environment. Educators have found participation rates in Virtual Learning Environments discussion forums to be low unless they are formally assessed (Mason, 2011; Young & McSparran, n.d.). While there are a number of reasons associated with this, including lack of motivation, it is the structure of the platform which, by its very nature appears to discourage students from communicating and interacting. Facebook is the social networking space of choice, and in 2009 Facebook use in New Zealand increased by 61% in one six month period (Attitude New Zealand, 2009). Facebook may provide an alternate environment to facilitate student discussion. Students are already accessing Facebook for personal use and the literature suggests that with proper promotion and management they will use Facebook as a means of communicating with lecturers and their peers to discuss class content and collaborate on class projects (Mason, 2011).

Conclusions and Recommendations

There are a number of international perspectives on the use of Facebook in ICT. It is important that we ensure any teaching and learning strategy implemented in the New Zealand ICT education system is culturally appropriate to the New Zealand context and the cultural uniqueness of New Zealanders is considered. One of the limitations of this article has been the absence of New Zealand focused statistics in relation to the effectiveness of integrating social networking into ICT education. With this in mind, New Zealand educators need to be focused on producing scholarly outputs that capture the New Zealand context in relation to the incentives, and barriers, of integrating social networking into the classroom. This will enable colleagues to have access to culturally appropriate resources to support their journey into the utilization of ICT as an essential component of the “teaching tool box”.

In recent years ICT has become an essential component of learning in New Zealand and the implementation of social networking creates new challenges for educational institutions. ICT policies need to be robust, value based, and focused on growing responsible digital citizens. Currently ICT Acceptable Use Policies capture an institution’s expectations in relation to ICT use within their organization and in some instances these are referred to as Public Charters. Their main purpose is to keep “users” physically and emotionally safe when interacting with institution guided online learning tools. The effectiveness of these documents can be compromised if the community does not subscribe to the values that underpin the policy. Therefore, it is essential to ensure institutions are able to demonstrate that they have a professional approach towards the management of their ICT users. This approach must move from one of regulation to a place where a high degree of autonomy and confidence is entrusted in our ICT users. As educators we must ensure we have a voice in the development of

these policies and actively participate in ICT policy development and review, as our focus is one of lifelong learning and this includes the growing of responsible digital citizens.

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