The Emergence of "Educational Networking": Can Non-commercial, Education-based Social Networking Sites Really Address the Privacy and Safety Concerns of Educators?

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Abstract

As distance education continues to grow in its popularity, so does the use of social networking. Hindered by concerns associated with privacy and safety, social networking sites (SNSs) are frequently banned from educational settings. The following article presents the implementation of an alternative social networking site in distance education. Findings from this study highlight the benefits and drawbacks of using a safe and secure SNS in an educational setting. More specifically, this manuscript presents the educational value and gains that the use of SNSs can have in distance education.

Keywords: distance education, social networking, technology, online learning, privacy and safety concerns

In recent years, the emergence and growth of social networking sites has been extensive and widespread. According to boyd and Ellison (2007), social network sites (SNSs) are web-based tools that allow users to develop a public or semi-public profile, electronically communicate with other users with whom they share a connection, and view and comment on their list of communications with other members of the group. The terms "social network sites" and "social networking websites" are often used interchangeably. The popularity of today's commercial social networking sites (SNSs) such as Facebook, Friendster, LinkedIn, LiveJournal, and MySpace, especially among today's tweens and teenagers is unprecedented. Today's SNSs have dramatically altered the way people communicate on the Internet. Currently Facebook is the most popular commercial SNS in the world with more than 400 million individual user profiles (Facebook, 2010). Despite commercial SNSs popularity, recent popular media coverage has drawn attention to some major concerns associated with using these sites by legal minors, most notably, privacy and safety issues (Barnard, 2008; George, 2006; Hodge, 2006). Based largely on privacy and safety concerns involving students, the educational community has been noticeably reluctant in allowing teachers to adopt SNSs in their classrooms (Totter 2006). In fact, many school districts and colleges and universities have actively taken steps to ban the use of SNSs in school facilities (Simon, 2008). Given the academic potential and benefits that SNSs have to offer, this paper aims to address the integration and use of an alternative, education based SNS called in Ning in Education and advocates its importance for learning. Moreover, this article will provide evidence detailing how alternative, education-based SNS, such as Ning in Education, can provide an enhanced venue for learning while simultaneously minimizing educators' concerns over student privacy and safety as compared to popular, commercially based SNSs, such as Facebook or MySpace.

The Emergence of Educational Networking

"Educational Networking" is the use of social networking technologies for educational purposes. As it relates to the use of social networking technologies in education, two major problems currently exist with the assumption that all SNSs are unsafe for students to use. First, current research indicates that these privacy and safety concerns, especially involving potential sexual predators using SNSs are significantly exaggerated (Finkelhor, Ybarra, Lenhart, boyd, & Lordan, 2007). Second, educators who are considering incorporating social networking technologies into their courses currently have a viable alternative to using commercial SNSs. An emerging subset of SNSs, including Ning in Education, have been developed and marketed for educators in the hope that they will expose their students to the educational and technological benefits associated with using SNSs. Advocates for the use of SNSs in educational communities, including Steve Hargadon, current director of the K12 Open Technologies Initiative at the Consortium for School Networking (CoSN) and founder of Classroom 2.0, a SNS specifically created for educators who are interested in introducing their students to social networking technologies argue that the current privacy and safety concerns associated with SNSs unfairly undermine their educational benefits. Currently, Hargadon also maintains a website, called Educational Networking that constantly updates social networking sites used exclusively in either K-12 or higher education environments.

Social-Networking Sites in Today's Classrooms: An Uneasy Relationship

A review of the current research reveals that the three most commonly cited reasons for not allowing students to use SNSs in educational environments include preconceptions associated with exposing students to inappropriate online content, fears of online sexual predators, and student-based cyberbullying, or online student harassment (Barnard, 2008; Conn & Brady, 2007; Griffith & Liyanage, 2008). Additionally, recent legal developments aimed at blocking commercial SNSs have advanced the movement to completely ban the use of commercial SNSs in schools and colleges and universities across the country. For example, the introduction of the Deleting Online Predators Act of 2006 (DOPA) legislation would, if passed by the United States Senate, strictly prohibit schools and libraries that currently receive federal E-rate funding from using commercial social networking websites. Some states, including Georgia, Illinois, and North Carolina have already introduced legislation to completely ban or significantly restrict access to SNSs in their respective state's public schools (McCullagh, 2006).

More recently, MySpace executives have met with state attorney generals from 49 states and the District of Columbia and developed an agreement referred to as the "Joint Statement on Key Principles of Social Networking," (Stelter, 2008). In this agreement, MySpace representatives have agreed to take more proactive measures to improve site safety on their SNS, including detailed steps to prevent known sexual predators from browsing their sites, provide more detailed information to parents and schools concerning online safety, cooperate more closely with law enforcement officials across the country, and develop improved technologies for both age and identity verification on SNSs (Angwin, 2007).

There is an emerging body of research studying the educational benefits associated with using social networking technologies in educational settings. A recent study conducted by Christine Greenhow and researchers at the University of Minnesota's College of Education and Human Development found that surveyed students who regularly use SNSs indicate that enhanced technology skills, creativity, receptivity to new and diverse views, and communication skills were among the most important educational benefits associated with using SNWs (University of Minnesota, 2008). A second, national study conducted by the National Schools Board Association (NSBA) in conjunction with Grunwald Associates reported that 70 percent of online surveyed teens reported discussing education-related topics, including pre-college planning and careers and 50 percent of students discussed issues directly related to their schoolwork while using SNSs (NSBA, 2007). SNSs have been found to provide unique opportunities to meet other people with similar interests as well as showcase a young person's artistic or musical abilities (boyd & Ellison, 2007; Ozkan & McKenzie, 2008). From a practical perspective, SNSs are increasingly being used by the business community as a form of online recruitment to attract potential candidates for employment (Brady, 2008). For example, the SNS, LinkedIn, which currently has more than 25 million members, is often used by both employers and employees as a means to make online professional contacts (Guynn, 2008).

What are Education-Based SNSs?

Fortunately, there is a growing and innovative collection of non-commercial, education-based SNSs that offer educators and students greater levels of user privacy and safety protections compared to existing commercial SNSs. In particular, the emergence of two education-based SNSs: Elgg and Ning in

Education, provide educators and their students with the educational benefits of using social networking technologies while simultaneously minimizing existing concerns relating to the protection of student privacy and safety commonly associated with commercially-based SNSs. Given the fact that these education-based SNSs are relatively new, there is currently little research detailing how educators are using these particular sites for e-learning purposes with their students.

Created and founded by Marc Andreesen, the founder of Netscape, and Gina Bianchini, Ning in Education (Ning) was designed to allow its users to create their own social networking space. As of September 2009, there were over 1.5 million social networks on Ning (The Ning Blog, 2009). Although it shares many of the same attributes found in a commercial SNS, including comment walls, friends, photo sharing, etc., Ning provides a considerably smaller and more private group setting. There are several different types and ranges of networks on Ning, from cake decorators, to musical interests, to educational pursuits. The lure of a SNS, such as Ning, is its ability to create a unique environment in which users may belong and control the membership of these online communities. As the administrator of a network, one can make the network as public or private as needed. Ning provides a venue for educators to "facilitate a strong sense of community among students" and encourages "personal interactions that can lead to the creation of new knowledge and collective intelligence" (New Media Consortium and Educause Learning Initiative, 2008, p. 2). A SNS can enhance discussion between students. It facilitates the sharing of information, personal and otherwise, which in turn can create an intimacy among students. Furthermore, Ning fosters and supports discipline-specific social networks, which allow for collaboration across geographical boundaries (New Media Consortium and Educause Learning Initiative, 2008). In a distance education based course, this is particularly important. Since students often do not get the opportunity to meet their peers or instructor in person, creating a sense of community where students feel comfortable collaborating is vital to the success of an online course. With the tools and affordances that Ning provides, some educators have already embraced the use of Ning in education to take advantage of social networking tools in a secure area on the Internet.

Methodology

The design of our study was two-fold. The first aim was designed to examine and identify student attitudes and perceptions towards the use of a secure SNS in distance education. The second aim was to detail the benefits associated with using a Ning in Education SNS given its privacy and security. Additionally, our study sought to provide documentation and detail how an education-based SNS can be used for teaching and learning while minimizing privacy and safety concerns.

Our survey sample was drawn from graduate students enrolled in one fully asynchronous distance education instructional technology course and two hybrid, synchronous distance education educational leadership preparation courses. All courses were offered through North Carolina State University's College of Education. The students were asked to complete an online survey detailing their personal attitudes and perceptions of using Ning in Education based on their specific course as an educational e-learning tool.

We developed an online survey to measure students' attitudes and beliefs toward Ning in Education. The online survey was comprised of the 14 Likert-type items shown in Table 1 asking students to rate their level of agreement on a four-point scale (ranging from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree). Student responses for Strongly Agree and Agree were collapsed into one response group and the same was done for Strongly Disagree and Disagree student responses. Data were collapsed to condensed categories for analysis purposes. Student responses were classified into four themes: communication, collaboration, reflection, and convenience. In addition, the survey contained background and demographic questions based on prior SNS experience and use as well as a series of open-ended questions addressing both the benefits and drawbacks of using Ning in Education in a graduate-level distance education course. The survey was administered online at the end of the semester, allowing students several months of experience using NING in Education in their courses. Students were given two weeks to complete the online survey.

A total of fifty students (n=50) completed the online survey, with a response rate of 96%. Of those surveyed students, 14% indicated that they already had a MySpace account and 30% had a Facebook account, with 12% of the student respondents indicating that they belonged to a different commercial SNS. Only 30% of the surveyed students had previously used an online social networking web site specifically for educational purposes. For a majority (70%) of the students, the use of Ning in Education for their course was the first time they had utilized a non-commercial SNS used exclusively for educational purposes.

Table 1: Student Responses to Items by Level of Agreement (n=50)

	Strongly Agree or Agree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Strongly Disagree or Disagree
Communicate with peers and colleagues outside setting of traditional classroom	84%	0%	4%
More time to effectively reflect on others' comments	76%	12%	12%
Collaborate with peers more frequently	72%	14%	14%
Communicate with peers and colleagues who I would not otherwise be able to communicate with	60%	18%	12%
Ning facilitates a more comprehensive understanding of topics	54%	30%	16%
Prefer using Ning to share and discuss ideas due to convenience	54%	18%	28%
Express thoughts more clearly and openly	50%	36%	14%
Comment and discuss ideas with colleagues efficiently	50%	30%	20%
Communicate effectively	44%	20%	36%
Comfortable responding to online discussions	44%	32%	26%
More detailed, in-depth conversation	36%	28%	36%
Comfortable sharing & discussing ideas	32%	28%	40%
Inhibits my ability to express my thoughts and opinions	16%	18%	66%
Does not allow for me to effectively communicate with peers and colleagues	2%	18%	72%

Study Results

To assess students' attitudes towards the use of Ning in distance education, both survey items as well as open-ended questions were examined for themes. Communication and collaboration emerged as central themes. Seventy percent of students felt that Ning allowed for more frequent collaboration with peers and colleagues within a course. Additionally, 84% agreed that it aided communication outside the traditional confines of the classroom. Students noted Ning's ability to provide a forum to "communicate with other cohorts," "collaborate with colleagues in distant areas," in addition to Ning's ability to enable the ability to "network with other educators." Students also noted that Ning served as a venue for learners "to 'e-congregate' to share and discuss ideas." Nearly half (42%) of the students agreed that Ning allowed for them to communicate more effectively as Ning provided the ability to "discuss topics continuously and continue discussions" over the course of the semester. A vast majority (88%) of students expressed the desire to use Ning as a means for communicating and sharing ideas in future courses. In addition to communication and collaboration, 76% of students felt that Ning in Education allowed for more time to effectively reflect and comment on other student comments. Ning "allows you time to think about others' comments while also allowing you time to reflect on comments in order to provide proper feedback." Half of the students preferred using Ning in Education to share and discuss ideas based on the convenience of the SNS. As noted by one student, "Through the use of social networking, one can benefit from the views of a variety of people from a wider geography." Another benefit of the use of SNSs in education is the ability to create personalized discussion threads. This benefit was viewed as a powerful function. "Being able to create and tailor discussions to my needs is a great feature. It allows for me to make my learning more personalized." From its inherit functions to its affordances, Ning in Education provided numerous educational values and benefits for learning within a secure environment.

Despite the benefits and enhancements that Ning in Education affords, students identified some drawbacks to the use of the SNS. Time emerged as the biggest drawback. While some students

identified Ning as allowing more time to reflect, other students stated that the amount of time required to keep current was a significant drawback. As reported by one student "it takes time to sit down and view the information…and respond." In addition to the time commitment that Ning may require, other students noted that the use of a SNS often results in a delay in responses to comments and questions. A little less than half (40%) commented about the time delay often associated with Ning. As stated by one student, "getting a response to a question/comment may not be immediate."

Implications

The current debate of whether or not to use SNSs in educational settings as part of the student learning process is being framed too narrowly either as no regulations or a complete ban on SNSs (Ewbank, Carter, & Foulger, 2008). Despite bans and restrictions on the use of SNSs in elementary through postsecondary schools across the country, findings from this study highlight and reinforce the findings of recent studies detailing the potential educational value of adopting e-safe SNSs as a viable alternative to commercially-based SNSs in educational settings. Educators who advocate the use of SNSs are often unable to access them in their classrooms due to Internet-based filtering restrictions. Those who advocate the use of social networking websites in educational settings argue that in their rush to safeguard students, educators are equally ignoring the educational and technological benefits associated with SNSs for students who will be working in the technologically rich and globalized workplace of the twenty-first century. As concerns mount over the potential student safety and security risks associated with SNSs, a growing number of e-safe SNSs are emerging. These new social networking sites aim to capitalize on the enormous popularity of online social networking while simultaneously providing a more secure and regulated platform for social networking activities.

Findings from this study highlight the educational value and gains that the use of a SNS can have in educational settings (DeSchryver, Mishra, Koehler, & Francis, 2009; Schroeder & Greenbowe, 2009). From supporting communication and collaboration to enhancing the discussion of thoughts and ideas, Ning in Education demonstrated its ability to function as an effective educational tool. The majority of the findings of this study were supportive of the uses of SNSs in distance education. Despites some of the drawbacks, the uses of SNSs, such as Ning in Education, have the ability to support, foster, and enhance learning.

Conclusion

Thus far, the educational community has been noticeably slow to adopt social networking technologies into the classroom curriculum due to privacy and safety concerns for students. Today's educators are often strongly discouraged from using commercial SNSs, including Facebook and MySpace because they are seen as inappropriate and incompatible with student learning. Non-commercial and e-safe SNSs, including Ning in Education, provide an exciting and innovative alternative for educators considering exposing their students the social networking technologies while greatly reducing student privacy and safety concerns. Results from this study provide promising results that for a majority of students, non-commercial and e-safe SNSs provide e-learning benefits in their courses. Students identified the educational advantages for using Ning to foster and support their learning. In addition to the benefits, students also noted some of the drawback and limitations of using SNSs in distance education courses. These results can help to better inform the educational community of how to best use SNSs to enhance and further learning via the use of SNSs, such as Ning. Further research needs to focus on the e-learning benefits of non-commercial and e-safe SNSs so the educational community will be more likely to incorporate them into the student curriculum.

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