Social Networks’ Role in Online Education

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Abstract— Since students of online education do not meet face to face in a classroom environment, students get engaged to the classes via third party content or learning management tools. It is evident that young people spend most of their time on Social Networking websites when they are connected to internet. These sites provide free of speech environment without any restrictions. Moreover, the research in this area points out that the students are being more social when they use one of these Social Networking websites. Based on this findings, one can say using Social Networking in online education may provide an active cyber classroom environment with positive learning outcomes. Therefore, this paper is focusing on the role of Social Networking websites affect on student betrothral in online education.

Index Terms— Social Networking, Distance Learning, Online Education.

I. INTRODUCTION

The focus of this paper is the student who enrolls in distance education format and the need to consider new models and practices for engagement. Because this student is often not on campus, he does not fall under the traditional paradigm of engagement that includes faculty-student interaction and active and collaborative learning in a face-to-face classroom. More specifically, this paper argues for an extension of the student engagement model to include an interaction with social network sites. Research on regular student engagement unpacks the means through which students successfully complete a degree or certificate. Regular student engagement focuses not on what students bring to campus (such as motivation and academic preparation), but what students do in campus and how student behaviors, opportunities, and environments mediate campus retention and graduation [1]. We continue with a discussion of SNSs, how these new technologies alter student engagement, and ways they can be used to further engage distance learners.

1.1. Traditional Teaching Method

Traditional teaching method provides the most comprehensive model of student engagement, which includes academic challenge, student-faculty interaction, and active and collaborative learning. Academic challenge entails the “amount of time and effort students devote to (a) studying and other academic work, (b) preparing for class, (c) reading assigned and other books, and (d) writing” and produces challenges that present themselves through the entire academic experience, from orientation to graduation [2]. Student-faculty interaction refers to interactions inside and outside the classroom, such as discussions about career plans, working on research projects, and discussing course readings outside the classroom. Active and collaborative learning involves both the individual student’s application of learned measures in varied situations, along with the interaction with colleagues in order to solve problems and tasks. This involves classroom response and discussion as well as group work.

1.2. Distance Learning as Alternative Method and its Issues

To understand the ways in which distance education learners engage, we need to consider use of technology, integration into the campus community and student-to-student communication. In the online community, the faculty own a significant role in distance education. Often faculty are the only connection that distance education learners have with the college. While some courses may require peer-to-peer interaction for group assignments, others do not require direct student interaction. Thus, faculty e-mail or other electronic-mediated responsiveness may be the only form of student engagement that takes place. Yet studies have found that students enrolled in online courses often did not receive accurate or complete feedback from instructors or received incomplete responses. High-quality and engaged teaching, online or in person, is critical to student engagement [3]. Distance education students do not enter brick-and-mortar classrooms with the opportunities to meet fellow students, share ideas and concerns, and increase their social and professional networks. Rather, these students must reach out to fellow students or be assigned collaborative learning [4]. Research found that students had little to no contact with each other. They did not hear other perspectives on issues and were unable to learn from each other. Distance education students who did reach out to others in electronic correspondence were more successful. Furthermore, when such learning occurs, distance education students were more likely to experience beneficial diverse and multicultural educational experiences [3]. Active and collaborative learning also require mediation by faculty interaction. Students in distance education courses report that discussion boards are rarely used and do not offer meaningful faculty interaction.

II. SOCIAL NETWORKING AS A TOOL

We propose that distance education student engagement must include the use of technology, integration, and an adapted view of social engagement using such technology. Social networking sites have the potential to mediate each of these
areas of engagement. SNSs offer ways to bridge communication gaps and facilitate interface inside the classroom and out. The first way in which SNSs can promote student engagement for distance education learners is by connecting students with the administration. SNSs put a massive amount of information and communication power at a student’s fingertips, making it possibly the ultimate synthesis of student-relevant data [5]. The live interaction available on SNSs through instant messaging and easy-to-update content creates a sense of a supportive campus environment. Through the ability to interact easily with campus-based services and faculty across the university, students are connected to a network—a specified group that shares information. In addition, researchers have found a connection between students’ ability to stay connected with a community and their use of SNSs [6]. When students engage with these sites, they are able to stay informed and continue to identify with that group. Community colleges can promote identification with the campus through continued interaction on sites. Furthermore, a variety of student services might use SNSs to address perceived gaps in administrative support, specifically in “non-academic responsibilities”. This is particularly important because online students often feel disconnected from the campus and require alternative methods for engagement.

While e-mail contact also serves as a method to increase student and faculty interaction [2], SNSs have the potential to connect students to each other in a more meaningful way. Social networking sites offer places to post pictures, video, and profiles with information on one’s job, preferences, interests, and the like. Message boards are also included where individuals can post information about a person or just send a message (this is an alternative to the e-mail feature, which is also commonly part of SNSs). Student personnel can also use SNSs to send personal messages and help students receive information in a timely manner. Learning more about faculty and fellow students though these opportunities can provide more meaningful interactions. In traditional classrooms and college campuses, active and collaborative learning includes asking questions in class, making class presentations, working with other students on projects, and discussing course concepts and readings with others [2]. Distance educators attempt to simulate these activities through the use of discussion boards, e-mail, group project assignments, and other methods to promote collaboration in the virtual classroom. Social networking sites can also create opportunities for active and collaborative learning through the use of communicative applications. For example, instructors could ask students to respond to short questions using the wall function on site, be available through the instant messaging function to other students, and form smaller groups to engage in collaborative projects in a nonspecifically academic program such as Blackboard. Using SNSs has an advantage to other course management systems because the messaging is immediate, students can network with each other, and many students are logged on to an SNS several hours each day.

Also, SNSs can increase the time that a student is engaged in learning by making the learning appear to be social or a part of regular activities, such as updating his or her status on site. Research notes that students who engage in active and collaborative learning regularly are more likely to attain their educational goals [7]. Students of the millennium generation have grown up with the Internet and have integrated SNSs into their daily social activities, so using these Web sites for educational purposes may combine their uses and promote more time spent in collaborative learning.

III. CHALLENGES OF ADOPTING SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES

The promise of SNSs for student engagement is not without challenges. Some students are apprehensive about interacting with administration on these sites which are typically used as places of social action and not as places to conduct school-related business [8]. A similar challenge related to the social dynamic of SNSs occurs when faculty and campus staff attempt to communicate using these sites. Some professors are finding difficulty maintaining a line of proper interaction with students and faculty on these Web sites. Campuses that seek to engage students using SNSs may consider alternative profiles and groups separate from students socially oriented profiles. Another challenge concerns integration of technology into pedagogy. A criticism of rapid adoption of technologies in the classroom concerns suitability and appropriate integration into curriculum. More often than not, faculty introduces a new piece of technology and do not use it for active and collaborative learning. Therefore, institutions must introduce technological conditions only if the instructional faculty retains a firm understanding of its applications. Wholesale changes to classroom requirements could leave instructors not fully adapted to distance education, resulting in poor student experience and extended time requirements for faculty [9]. Therefore, integration of SNSs needs to become a seamless part of the curriculum and not just an additional means for communication. Professional development programs and mentoring among faculty to share successful integration of these sites are just two examples of ways to overcome these challenges and capitalize on the power of social networking in the classroom.

Technology infrastructure and legal matters also pose challenges for using SNSs to engage distance learners. Colleges and universities struggle with the integration of third-party Web-based innovations because the information is stored outside secure campus servers. In addition, more online communication creates a need for additional storage capacity on campus servers. When a message is sent from site, an e-mail is sent to the profile owner, thus creating more e-mails for campus servers to store. Transmitting personal information in an online environment without security protocols may be too risky for some colleges to consider, and alternative arrangements, such as the development of an SNS created and stored locally on a campus server, are just too costly.
IV. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The promise of SNSs to engage distance education students is great. We recommend several new lines of inquiry for empirically testing new models of student engagement based on student use of technology. First, more research is needed that targets distance education students. The assumption of students who enroll in distance education is that they already engage in computer technologies. Do students who use computers for instruction also engage in other computer-mediated social networking behaviors? We need to know if these learners have profiles on SNSs and how often they are on a computer. Also, are these sites perceived as only social spaces? Are the sites enhancing or detracting from social engagement for distance students? Does the active integration of SNSs integrate two spheres, social and academic, that students perceive as incompatible?

Second, the scholarship of teaching and learning has yet to engage in experiments that implement various forms of online activities within the context of distance education courses. Do students who engage in SNSs have better outcomes, such as higher grades and better retention? Most important, surveys that measure student engagement do not disaggregate or sample distance education students and are just beginning to integrate questions about technology. More measures on surveys will help to begin unraveling the potential of SNSs on student engagement.

Third, the impact of SNSs on student identity. Examine the ways in which students develop their individual identities through technological means such as these sites. We need to examine in more detail and with additional student groups the impact of the Internet on student engagement on campuses. Another recommendation is to consider promoting the use of SNSs by integrating these sites within the course curriculum. Faculty could promote interaction by creating group or fan pages, developing accounts to update peers and faculty on their course progress, or creating blogs to promote discussion and commentary on course subjects [10]. While learning has been accessed primarily through writing assignments, shorter updates and the use of Web links, video, and other can show a degree of cognitive complexity and an acceptance of multiple learning styles. Assessment of learning does not need to occur in traditional formats, especially when students are engaging in an online format.

V. CONCLUSION

Social networking sites have much promise for engaging distance education learners, a group that has little to no physical connection. Distance education students can benefit from more meaningful interactions with faculty and fellow students, keep students actively engaging with the campus, and provide more access to campus services, thereby creating a more supportive culture for distance learners. Universities, departments, and instructors must review and overcome the challenge to experiment with these new and low-cost technologies to engage one of the largest student populations: distance learners.

The new era embraces the perception that high quality education is shaped by changes in the characteristics of student learners and the ways in which they use new technologies to exchange information. One thing is clear: the convergence of social networking technologies and a new "always on" pedagogy is rapidly changing the face of education.

REFERENCES