



Using Social Media in Learning Environments

Samer Bamansoor¹, Kamalanathan Shanmugam²

¹APU, Malaysia, samirleek@gmail.com

²APU, Malaysia, kamalanathan@apu.edu.my

ABSTRACT

Numerous social media tools are being used for different purposes including social networking, blogging, social bookmarking, media-sharing tools and social tagging, among others. These tools significantly affect the learning environment. This paper presents common web-based tools and services and discusses the possible applications and uses in learning environments to support teaching and learning.

Key words: Social media, social networking sites, learning environment.

1. INTRODUCTION

Social media refers to a set of web-based tools and services used for a wide range of applications. Social media is characterized as Web 2.0 resources that emphasize active participation, connectivity, collaboration, as well as sharing of knowledge and ideas among users [1]. Web 2.0 provides new ways for sharing information online in an open social environment.

Different types of social media tools and services are used for different purposes. Social networking sites are used mainly for socializing and making friends, Wiki is used for creating content collaboratively, Blogs are used for personal journal and reflections, and social bookmarking used to share, organize, store, manage and search bookmarks of web pages. The main advantages of these Web 2.0 tools is their ability to enable users to create and share content rather than just access and browse the content. Web 2.0 tools such as social networking sites, blogs, wikis, and social bookmarking allow learners to control their own learning and to provide them with unique learning opportunities [2]. These features can be used for learning purposes to overcome the limitations of the previous e-learning system and tools, such as Learning Management Systems. In a study [3], the authors stated that one of the main reasons of the failure of e-learning systems is related to the inflexible structure as well as the pedagogical and theoretical principles of these systems as teacher-centered technologies, which limit the role of users as passive learners. In contrast, social media tools support new features to make learning environments more dynamic. Further discussions on the types as well as their benefits and uses for teaching and learning purposes are presented in the next section.

2. SOCIAL MEDIA TOOLS

2.1 Social Networking Sites

According to [4], the first recognizable social network site (SNS) was launched in 1997. However, since 1998 a number of social networking sites have been substantially growing. These applications support various combinations of social services which provide new opportunities to create personal, professional and dating profiles as well as to help people leverage their business networks.

There are a number of social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter which are a facet of a larger suite of more recent Internet technologies which are collectively known as Web 2.0 [4]. The overall degree of popularity and growth of social networking websites is very apparent. One of the most significant social media websites in higher education is Facebook [5], [6], [7], due to its communicative and interactive features [8], and to the original emphasis and focus on the academic market [9]. The Facebook website was created by online education communities of learners with the aim of sharing knowledge and experience, or who simply having an interest in the exploration of works and researches of other students or lecturers. In [6], results revealed that 92% use Facebook. The results of exploratory survey [5] confirmed that the use of Facebook is increasing significantly among university students as the results showed that 97.2% of the sample use Facebook [5]. In the report of EDUCAUSE Center for Applied Research (ECAR), it was found that 90% of university students used Facebook. The popularity of social networks among university students opens opportunities and creates challenges for higher education institutions [5].

It is stated in [10] that Facebook provides a platform whereby students or group of learners have the option to decide what they want to discuss and who they want to work with. In a study carried out on the use of Web 2.0 technologies as being a sort of platform for knowledge sharing, it was observed that around 70% of the students selected Facebook as the most effective platform for the purposes of knowledge and information sharing between the students [11]. It was also shown that the internet was the mode of choice for sharing knowledge and information like exam times, events, and lecture cancellation. This suggests that social networking websites such as Facebook do have the ability to deliver a platform for the purposes of learning whereby students are potentially at the middle of all the activities. The capacity of Facebook is huge and it is very suitable for instructional use

by the faculty to create a highly engaging classroom learning environment. In another study about social network learning adoption in higher education in Tanzania, students stated that they are very satisfied and comfortable using social network sites for learning purposes. They explained that they used YouTube can easily access information and courses related to their study [12]. Utilizing this service is free and connects students to larger communities of people with similar interests. It is in such environments that the individual user or groups of users can decide what they want to discuss and who they want to work with to achieve their educational goals [10].

Social Network sites allow users to interact and share data with other users via the web. The main concept of social network tools is that involving a wider participation of sharing data via the web. A literature review by [13] about the role of social software tools in education provided clear insights about the educational goals of using social software tools. It was reported that students already use social software tools so "if you can't beat them, help them" [13]. This conclusion is in line with [5], in which the author stated that, with the current dominant use of these social technologies among students, the question that needs to be raised is "how students can spend much more time and effort on academic use within Facebook and other SNSs rather than concentrating on the question of to use or not to use".

Social network sites help educators to work as a group and interact with each other to enhance and support their knowledge. People like to work in groups to support their learning and using social network tools helps them to offer both an environment and infrastructure for informal and borderless learning [14]. Moreover, students are using their social network sites as a part of their formal and informal learning activity such as checking the validation and appreciation of creative work, peer/alumni support and help with school related tasks [15]. Students can feel socially isolated when they are geographically apart from their teachers and mates, and this may cause a negative effect for some learners. Social network tools encourage teachers and students to pursue active learning and feedback from each other [16], [8]. It has been noticed that there is an increase in the social motivation for students who engage in online discussions using the social network sites.

In an ICT world, the high connectivity between people, especially learners, makes them co-producers of data and content rather than passive consumers. In [15], the author presented two themes about the incorporation of social network sites into education. She argued that (1) social network sites can serve as direct and indirect support for learning; and (2) Online social network sites can simulate social and civic benefits, which has implications for education. The use of content sharing in order to support student learning involves the use of a computer network within a learning environment. The knowledge as well as the experience sharing is viewed as a tool for the purposes of

knowledge construction that is accurate which is capable of matching the real context within real life. Students realize the benefits of using technology and the outcome of improper use of technology. Additionally, students must make a selection of the technology which suits their career the best. The sharing of knowledge and cooperative learning using social networks such as Facebook or by using e-mail and blogs would help students connect the lessons they learn in class to their real life.

Wikis are another kind of service which allows information sharing through building of a corpus of knowledge within a set of interlinked web pages [17]. There are a number of US educational institutions that have utilized the wikis system to assist their students to work together in order to interpret texts, to author articles and essays, to improve their research and communication skills and to share ideas collectively [18]. Social networking is the next type of service that supports the sharing of educational knowledge between multiple people. The social networking comprises websites like Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter which permit the sharing of professional and educational knowledge between peers. Additionally, these systems could be used for educational purposes to distribute questions and solutions between community members that are searching for specific information [19].

2.2 Applications of social network content sharing

The use of social networking services are said to be increasing in importance on the Internet and have started to become very important for work, leisure and education related activities [20]. The fact is that social networking has managed to create new methods of communicating and sharing of information. It is claimed by [21] that the main aim of social networking would be to create online communities of people that share interests, educational knowledge and activities or even to review the works of other people. It is pointed out by [22] that social content sharing means the dissemination of digital learning materials in order to allow the integrating of various educational resources from various different vendors and to provide new educational offerings for multiple different customers. Recently, there have been an increasing number of global initiatives, which have embraced content sharing as being a very practical and effective way to produce digital learning materials at lower costs and in lesser time.

The influence of content sharing on higher education is apparent in many ways. Out of the classroom, educational institutions have capitalized on the power of content sharing in order to disseminate information, to network, as well as to provide support services. For instance, social networks have essentially changed the way that departments like admissions, athletics, alumni relations, libraries, marketing/communications as well as student services would operate. The students would utilize social networks out of the classroom in order to socialize, organize and network. Within

the classroom, learners have now started to use social network for all kinds of purposes. There are some learners who use this kind of technology to provide support to various traditional course aims and these could include the use of blogs as a kind of learning portfolio. There are others who seek to utilize these kinds of tools in a transformative sense, such as students creating networks and taking part in collaborations which are related to the academic program outside of the university community.

2.3 Social Bookmarking

Another kind of web-based service is social bookmarking and this essentially provides users with the ability to share, organize, store, manage and search bookmarks of web pages and to tag those records by using significant words on the Internet [23]. It is apparent that bookmarks have been in existence for a number of years but social bookmarks which are in conformance with the RSS information sharing standard have only started to emerge recently [24]. As noted earlier, a very popular social bookmarking service is Del.icio.us and this website allows the learners to save certain important websites addresses very fast and to categorize them using one or multiple 'tags'. Simultaneously, Del.icio.us has managed to prove itself as being very effective when it comes to searching for information [17]. This is because the website allows internet users to make individual classifications and categorization of links by the use of common words and also by using a combination of words.

[25] claims that Del.icio.us is capable of being used to satisfy certain educational purposes by allowing for the ease of distributing reference lists, peers, bibliographies as well as other resources between students and teachers. [26] states that the bookmarking service provided by Del.icio.us can help people who are required to utilize multiple computers in various locations with the ability to find out items that are the same to their aims, to build up collections of resources, to provide course-integrated instructions as well as to distribute information among students, teachers and peers.

The next essential feature of using social bookmarking services is that it can be used in the educational sphere in order to allow people with a common interests, subjects or courses to be added to an individual's own network so as to allow for easy monitoring of the tagging activity of other users for certain interesting items [17]. This would eventually allow for more effective communication between peers who have studied similar majors or have taken the same courses. This provides an opportunity for knowledge and reference sharing.

2.4 Blogs

Web-logs or blog is a term that coined by Jorn Barger in 1997 and it makes reference to a simple webpage that comprises of brief paragraphs of information, opinion, personal diary entries, or links that are labeled as posts which are arranged chronologically in the format of an online journal [27]. [28] states that blogs are a new kind of technology and only started

to gain popularity in the later part of the 1990s. An ordinary blog would typically combine images, texts and links to other blogs, websites or media that is related to its topic. The reader's ability to leave a comment in an interactive format is labeled as an essential feature of blogs. The majority of blogs are mostly textual but there are blogs that are focused on art, photographs, videos, sketches, music and audio.

Presently, blogs are starting to be used increasingly by students, professors and teachers in order to discuss and share their knowledge and experience within the sphere of higher education. The use of educational blogs is said to produce a number of benefits and these include the fact that it allows the students to express ideas, to reflect on their experience as well as to speak to their family, friends, and other students. In consequence, the learners are able to take fast action and to obtain help from their parents, their friends and also their education advisers [28]. In addition, blogs are also of great benefit to educational institutions as they serve as a free marketing tool which is capable of creating a new channel to promote institutional programs and courses to various students, faculty members and also academic staff [28].

A very popular video blog is YouTube. [29] states that many educational institutions and also students are using technologies that are similar to YouTube. However, an increasing number of universities are shifting to using YouTube because it is free. A popular approach involves using YouTube to provide an online platform where videos of guest speakers for the academic program can be posted and accessed by students and this is very useful when it comes to online classes and for classrooms that are located in rural settings [30]. It is also a service that can be used to provide support to practical courses and applied sciences. This is to ensure that students can prepare in advance before attending upcoming classes and to memorize study materials that are based on visual facilities.

There is yet another kind of blog used by students and this is the Flickr photoblog. In essence, Flickr provides the students studying photography or art-related subjects with the opportunity to receive feedback as well as to engage with a community of experts and also amateur enthusiasts and this helps expose the students to realities of professional practice [25]. Besides that, Flickr also supports participatory learning and this is through capitalizing on the ubiquity of digital cameras and the desire of the students to share creative work. Through introducing these students to social and collaborative technologies, Flickr provides a very easy and highly comfortable platform for these students to engage with the study related content and it also provides a community in the process of collective knowledge creation [25].

3. CONCLUSION

Social Media tools make the learning environment more dynamic by supporting new features and characteristics. These features and tools facilitate the learning environment for both students and teachers and encourage students to take an effective role in creating and sharing the information rather than just access the content. The paper discussed the

main types of Social Media tools such as social networking sites, blogs, wikis, and social bookmarking and explained how these tools provide learners and teachers with new learning opportunities.

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