The Library's Role in Social Networking Site Use in Education

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Abstract: *Social Networking is a phenomenon that has revolutionized communication and changed fundamental processing methods for a lot of immersed users. Successful experiments with the use of Social Networking Sites (SNS) in educational practice have renewed the need for support from librarians who, in their turn need to endorse the digital transformation of communication technologies, in so doing also changing the way they operate. This paper offers a sampling of the literature that deals with these issues.*

Social Change through SNS

The phenomenon of Social Networking has revolutionized communication and caused changes that dig deep into cognition and the way we process information (Mallia, 2009). There can be no doubt that it is a social communications revolution, but it goes well beyond that, since the way we communicate has inroads into all that we are. Therefore the effect reaches into all aspects of private and social life, creating a constantly wired (or, more realistically, wireless) society that is interconnected in ways that go all the way from the trivial to the essential.

The popularity of social networking sites continues to grow. Data from January 2014, published on www.statista.com, shows, for example, how far-reaching social networks like Facebook, with its 1,184 million users, really are. Facebook is, of course, first. QZone is second with 632 million, Google+ third with 300 million users. LinkedIn fourth with 259 million, Twitter fifth with 232 million, Tumblr sixth with 230 million, and Tencent Weibo seventh with 220 million users.

This spread of networks of individuals that might or might not have known each other in actual fact, and which negates (in the main) geographical boundaries, has brought about a number of indisputable phenomena. I say "in the main" because there can be no doubt that cultural boundaries have crossed over somewhat to Web 2.0. And political realities dictate, for example, that China has its own social networks (Lagerkvist, 2011). In terms of sheer numbers, QZone is second only to Facebook itself. Other social networks such as the microblogging site Tencent Weibo also features in the top seven.

The individual interlinking aspect, and the creation of virtual communities that borrow heavily from social interaction, but have interactive rules of their own, are at the core of the major thrust of the social networking revolution. But very close behind this, and added to massively by the increase in easy access to mobile means of communications (Yang, Cheng, Hu, and Zhang, 2012), is the persistent presence of information on the go. What used to be primarily the domain of libraries in a non-technological past, or, to a lower level, the encyclopedia set at home, is now accessible at the touch of a button on a mobile phone.

This has lead to quite a chaotic lack of organization of gathered information, leading to what can be described as individual content that has no interlacing network and ease of access. Classification of information, in these circumstances, becomes tenuous, and the resultant patchwork of declarative and procedural knowledge gained from the process is rendered quite inefficient.

Social Networking and Education

That is why it was only a matter of time before the unique characteristics of Social Networking started finding their way into educational practice — in a sense using Social Networks themselves to help remedy what they themselves will have created. This is not as automatic or as easy as it seems, because the very nature of Social Networking is essentially social (Green and Bailey, 2010), and resists being integrated within formalized structures. In other words, the initial indications were that the tools available within Social Networking Sites (SNS) could be made to serve the larger purpose of direct instruction, but the base on which their popularity is built could not be transferred, because that was purely affective — the essential motivation for their use by millions depended on informal, personal sharing in random ways. So this was the very antithesis of what would essentially have been their adoption as a sort of popular VLE.

But the challenge was taken up, and a large number of various ways were explored whereby SNS could actually be integrated into educational practice. These, of course, varied widely, though they can be subdivided into four wide-ranging groups. That is, *integrated:* the utilization of social networking accounts as part of the architecture of the instructional design; *appended:* social network pages added onto an existing course structure as a continuation of the delivery, or as a way for students to reinforce, discuss, and problematize the learning gained through the formal course itself; *supportive:* a less strict version of the previous, in which either course administrators or students themselves either create dedicated accounts, or make use of existing ones to support the learning from the formal course itself; and *random:* completely incidental reference to course content, delivery, and imparted information in the course of normal social networking usage on individual student and/or instructor accounts (Mallia, 2014).

Work by, among many others, **Baran** (2010), **Gray**, **Annabell** and **Kennedy** (2010), **Pilgrim** and **Bledsoe** (2011), **Greener** and **Grange** (2011), and **Wang**, **Woo**, **Quek**, **Yang**, and **Liu** (2012) led the way. In turn this helped motivate the collection of international papers on the subject edited by myself (Mallia, 2014) and which includes a wide range of experimentations as well as practical models of practice. A sampling from the book can provide examples of a variety of SNS utilizations. An Israeli-Palestinian study, for example utilized the profiling capabilities of Facebook. A page was created for the persona of a long-dead but famous mathematician, administered by student teachers, and friended by students who utilized the account to further their mathematical knowledge (Baya'a & Daher, 2014). Apart from the obvious Facebook content, other social networks were also invoked and experimented with, such as the education friendly Edmodo (Bonanno, 2014), Diigo (Fenn, 2014), and Twitter (Ullyot, 2014), indicating the variety of wealth that could be tapped, with divergent and trial methodologies applying them to everything from **Shakespeare** teaching to Environmental Higher Education. There is no domain that cannot be enriched by a controlled usage of SNS. For example,

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Aayeshah and **Bebawi's** (2014) observations and examination of Facebook use leading to it being a useful online collaborative platform for investigative journalism students.

The Librarian as Supporter and Partner

But the need for support is persistent in this area. Or getting the necessary content for the mathematics profiling, for example. Backing up data that corroborates investigative findings of journalists, to tie this together with two of the examples given above. Traditionally, the library has been the constant referral point in anything related to education. Things have not changed in this respect, even if methodologies have adopted Web 2.0 tools and axioms.

In fact, since around 2005, the term Library 2.0, based on the interactive context of Web 2.0, has been discussed (Anttiroiko and Savolainen, 2011). "This new trend urges public libraries to reconsider their role as mediators between local and global knowledge processes and as a local institution that can contribute to the increase of local human capital." (p.87)

According to **Anttiroiko** (2009), referred to in **Anttiroiko** and **Savolainen** (2011), the most important Web 2.0-related functionalities that can be adopted by libraries are:

1. *Social networking:* maintaining an interactive page for communication purposes.
2. *Special interest networks* (SINs): a number of sites that provide for special interest communities and create.
3. *Media communities and content-based SNSs:* producing, storing and sharing videos, photos, music, etc.
4. *Blogging:* keeping blogs and e-diaries.
5. *Short messaging, feeding and alerting:* sending short messages or alerts to various target groups.
6. *Sharing views, opinions, reviews and news:* sharing information using opinion, review and rating sites.
7. *Reference works:* collecting and sharing peer-to-peer generic or thematic knowledge particularly from wiki-based applications.
8. *Collective intelligence:* Websites or applications that combine content from different sources.
9. *Communication services and instant messaging:* using a variety of communication tools, including real-time communication through instant messaging (IM), Voice over IP (VoIP), video-based communication, etc.

There can be no doubt that if these tools are used by the librarian they can aid and abet what is today more commonly considered the context of the library — i.e., not just a repository of books, but a space for the integration through service of an information, education, and entertainment seeking public, maintained through multi-channel content and staff that are care-givers to the mind. This context also fits with what most believe to be the personalized delivery of instruction that results from the intimate nature of social network interaction.

However, an interesting study carried out in Lund, Sweden by **Hanna Carlsson**, has determined that librarians might need to give up a certain amount of self-determination in the process (Carlsson, 2012). She followed four librarians participating in the library's Digital Content and Presence department (DCP) "whose daily work consisted of rebuilding and managing the library Website and maintaining the library's "digital presence." The latter meant making sure that the library was actively using different social media, such as Facebook, YouTube … and Twitter … , and kept up-to-date with the latest developments in this arena." (p.203). To a large extent, Facebook determined the framework for their efforts. Work was sped up. "The continuously changing conditions and perpetual uncertainty this caused added to the workload and increased the amount of stress" (p.207). But the researcher also noticed the increased creativity of the library workers, working within the parameters, but doing so in ways that were entirely their own. This quells any utopian claims for Library 2.0 procedures, but at the same time shows that the use of SNS as a way of extending the work of the library can work and even do so creatively.

This is a step towards "blended librarianship" (Shank & Bell, 2011) — intended more as a vision of the educational role "within the context of radical paradigm shifts occurring in society driven by the evolution of information technologies" for the academic librarian. But this is a role that can easily be played by all librarians, as they become "education partners" — working within the context of Web 2.0 applications, particularly SNS, to support formal educators, and those who seek informal, independent learning.

For this to happen, librarians need to get skills whereby they can utilize fully new digital technologies, information formats, and online resources to marry skills they already possess in the field of librarianship, and which are extremely compatible with the new channels and vehicles.

Another way in which libraries can contribute through SNS to education is through "Connected Learning," described by **Ito** and **Martin** (2013) as being "both a form of learning, as well as an agenda for educational design, reform, and social change that leverages the affordances of new media to broaden access to educational opportunities." (p.30)

Ito and **Martin** think that librarians are eminently suited to partner in this, as "Libraries, which have long been centers of community activity, are uniquely situated to become a nexus of connected learning because their mission centers on personalized and interest-driven learning. They are also a third space — not school and not home — which allows activities and practices to meld together. As guides to online information and technical literacy, librarians are often already guides to connected learning." (p.30). The emphasis here is that libraries can drive both content and form, helping students understand the very nature of the tools elicited from new media technologies and Web 2.0 resources, like SNS, as well as utilizing those tools themselves in order to convey this and other content.

One example of the successful application of Web 2.0 functionalities to libraries is the Learning 2.0 (L2.0) staff training courses, addressing the constantly changing landscape of emerging technologies, held over a number of years in Australia and the U.S. (Stephens, 2013). There are a number of exemplary practices mentioned in **Stephens'** paper, but one that is very important to the changes happening in educational motivation, needs to be singled out here.

As ease of access to information becomes progressively more manifest, a move towards self-directed, independent learning (e.g., Svinicki, 2010; Thomson, 2010; Nemec, 2011; Hains and Smith, 2012) seems to be quite evident. This is primarily fuelled by the rapid "need-to-know" that has become a fixture of those with easy access to the internet, but has developed quite extensively into a life-choice. This, in turn, is often driven by a resistance to organized, hierarchical learning fostered by the cognitive processing change caused in immersed new technology users by hypertextuality (Mallia, 2011).

The foundation of L2.0, according to **Stephens** (2013) is illuminated by those same concepts that fuel adult and self-directed learning. "Supporting adult learners and enabling their own discoveries are notable foci of the literature related to adult learning and the concept of SDL" (p.130). L2.0 enabled independence and promoted confidence, which augurs well for Web 2.0 savvy librarians, providing the tools not only to help information mining by SDL, independent learners, but also, through the very nature of their expertise, help create a structure for that learning to be retrievable and applicable.

A number of publications have collected papers about the librarian as user of SNS in support of education, notably (the unfortunately already dated) collection by **Parkes** and **Walton** (2010). Worth mentioning here, too, is a good review of the literature related to Web 2.0 services practiced by medical, academic and research libraries, carried out by **Gardois**, **Colombi**, **Grillo** and **Villanacci** (2010).

Conclusion

The revolution that has mutated society, interconnected it and changed the way it thinks and acts, is slowly leaving its effect on those who need to lead that society once the parameters of learning and information absorption become tenuous and vague. That is why educators have taken on board the use of Web 2.0 functionalities, definitely not least Social Networking Sites. It is also very clear that educators cannot do without the support and collegiality of librarians, who have already

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acknowledged the change and many have endorsed it. There can be no doubt that this needs to be one way forward for library services.

To conclude, a very apt quote from **Shank** and **Bell** (2011): "The educational role of librarians is more essential today than at any other period in the profession's long history. The growing torrent of digital information will challenge educators' ability to teach the appropriate skills and knowledge that will allow students to become and stay 'knowledge-able.'" (p.109).

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